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# *INSOMNIA*

*A Toothless Life*



**Nilton Nixon**

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**Insomnia**  
**A Toothless Life**

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*Dedicated to the  
thousand dreams that  
slipped through  
my fingers*

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*“Therefore do not  
worry about tomorrow,  
for tomorrow will  
worry about itself.  
Each day has enough  
trouble of its own.”*  
*Mat. 6:34*

PROLOGUE



Should a story that has begun end someday? Or does it  
not matter if it remains unfinished?

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# PART I

The day your life begins to seemingly lose meaning is the day you start paying more attention to the little things around you and, more than ever, to yourself. Your shoelaces, the dust on your table, the missing buttons on your shirt, the color of your hair, your beard that seems to grow faster than before, your wrists, your eyes barely opening fully, the expired food you used to eat, the overflowing garbage can, the unpleasant smell of your breath due to rarely brushed teeth, your heart that seems to need consultation, your heavy shoulders, a tired body, and perhaps a thirsty soul. These things are not too small to go unnoticed. They are actually big and important—things a man with fast-paced living fails to recognize every time. But now, I am no longer that kind of man. My pace has slowed so much that everything has become big in my life. Everything is important to me.

How small I felt when I decided to slow my pace more than ever. In the park, how beautiful the Solidagos were—small in size but grand and striking in their clusters; the fragrance of the roses, which were not meant only for loved ones in graves or those who fell in love; the fresh air; the shade of the lamppost; the old benches by the river, their aged wood carrying a smell almost no one noticed; the same parents bringing their kids on weekends to chase butterflies and fly kites.

In the streets, the cars in different colors—mostly yellow, I thought, at least on the streets I used to pass;

the people crossing the roads, many of whom must have shared my route every day though I never noticed; some wore almost the same clothes every day; the aging faces of people who seemed older despite no new year having passed; the city air, so different from the park's; couples walking hand in hand; the same old men reading newspapers; and the beggars' voices, as familiar as an old song in my playlist.

On the bus, the same lady sat, gazing out of the window; the same man in the same suit stood, quietly looking at her; schoolboys glued to their gadgets; the old, bearded man with a cap, dozing off; the stoic man at the back, observing everything around him; perhaps a tired mother sleeping soundly, deprived of rest at night; and a young boy engrossed in a book that seemed to change every day, with glasses perched on his nose.

There were actually many things out there that truly caught my attention. Many things were running at the same time; 'I don't know which one started first.' And what about the ending? I also found myself doing almost the same things every day, hoping no one noticed them, because if they did, I would be seen as a foolish man walking hectically without knowing exactly where to go. I hoped no one noticed it, letting only myself recognize all this nonsense. Maybe this was what was called 'life,' which the teachers used to advertise at school, ensuring that everything was beautiful and in order—just to tell

the kids that worrying about tomorrow was worthless because we were living in paradise. Of course, the poor ones who didn't know how to think loved those fairy tales. Fairy tales were loved by kids but hated by grown-ups, who realized that life wasn't about 'living happily ever after.' But as you became parents, you needed to have at least one fairy tale to tell your children, just to make sure they dreamed of paradise in this cruel world. And if they had nightmares, it was because they forgot to brush their teeth before going to bed. But it seemed that the fear in the kid made him forget that he was already forced to brush his teeth before going to bed. Just like his parents, who were living their own nightmares every day, forgetting to brush their teeth every night before going to bed. Actually, dreams were of no importance to grownups—reality was what mattered. Nothing was crueler than having a nice dream but living a nightmare: empty pockets; heartbreaks; isolation; fake smiles with colleagues; showing no mercy in queues; the sweat on your forehead every time you spoke in front of your boss; the potential to lose your job for reasons unheard; lost connections with loved ones; dangerous lies; phone calls intentionally avoided; holidays that seemed too short; and the rain that tortured the longing of the soul. That's why many grown-ups refused to sleep at night, making even a little effort to fix their lives before the sun rose again. Sometimes the effort came in the form of thinking and overthinking. It didn't matter—what mattered was

that I truly lived life as an adult: drinking coffee, lighting up a hopeless cigarette, and thinking about the reason why the boss didn't answer my greeting today.

To have your age added up was nothing special unless you were a kid, when your happiness was your parents' responsibility. But for a grown-up, it was quite different—not just your happiness, but your life became your responsibility. To sit without doing anything was your freedom as a grown-up, but paying for your electricity credit was far more your responsibility. Among the freedoms I had, I loved watching TV. I knew it seemed like a waste of time for a grown-up, but I thought it was much uglier to sit in the streets. The point was to 'sit'; I didn't care about the programs on the TV as I sat in front of it. Sometimes I sat there playing useless games that made me a hero for an instant, at least in my own world: killing the villain, rescuing the princess, and flying without wings. Other times, I chatted with people while telling them, 'I am watching TV.' It seemed awkward to watch TV while chatting with someone, but people understood well how being a grown-up worked. The excuses we made were really grown-up stuff; no one questioned them. Grown-ups truly needed excuses to be seen as important people and included in the group of those who valued life.

And there I was, sleeping on the couch while my favorite team had a match. I questioned the word

‘favorite’—just to tell my colleagues that I loved watching football games and discussed matches whose scores I had secretly checked in the toilet. Nothing was special; it was just men’s style to watch football and talk about it. But in truth, I loved anime. At least I had one anime that interested me, but unfortunately, it wasn’t among the grown-up topics to discuss. Truly, it had to be shameful for me to watch something meant for kids. Anime and cartoons were childish things. But ‘why am I so interested in them?’ I would say I learned better about life from anime. I thought even grown-ups should watch it; I learned about misery, love, resilience, and mystery from anime. The characters seemed real in their words. I didn’t know if watching anime as a kid and as a grown-up was different, but it must have been. As a grown-up, you watched with your mind—thinking about the meaning of words and relating the plot to real life—whereas kids watched merely with their eyes.

Thus, it wasn’t fair to claim you had truly watched the movies as a kid. As a grown-up, the same movie could deliver a different message, and maybe the movies you watched as a kid with laughter could turn into horror movies for you as a grown-up. I remembered a cartoon I watched back home when I was just a kid that I really loved. It was about a boss who always treated his worker badly. I laughed as the poor worker was kicked and thrown into the mud. But now, it seemed like a horror

movie as I remembered it and related it to my life as a worker. I didn't want to watch that cartoon again, even if I had the opportunity to do so. It hurt me.

Another topic for discussion was politics. I was super excited about it when I was around. The good thing was that those people who loved politics used to talk too much, and I found my way to shut my mouth, acting as if I was interested in their unrealistic plans for the nation. For about ten minutes, I would add some nods with 'uhm' in agreement. While they were talking, in fact, I also had in my head the scenes that were truly of my interest: some new girls in the office; some cartoons people had recently talked about that I just needed to watch as fast as possible so I could join their laughter and storytelling; some awkward noises at night from the neighbors; some songs probably recently released and going viral for no reason, just because they were sung by a handsome artist or danced to by a beautiful girl in town; and so on.

I used to talk about having an 'office,' but in reality, I didn't have any kind of real office. 'I am an actor.' I didn't have an office where I could sit and play with keyboards in front of a big screen. I just got accustomed to saying that I worked in an 'office' because that's how I lied to the people who loved me—my parents back in the hometown, some aunties who talked too much, and others who admired me simply because I had lived in the city for almost ten years. By saying the word 'office'—

*kantor*—they admired me. They didn't ask more about it because they knew nothing about it. Even reading and writing were not part of their world.

And so, I lived in a paradise-like world every time I went back to my hometown for the holidays. Afterward, I returned to the city and worked in my real 'office.'

I didn't know if the *kantor* of an actor was the stage or not. But what convinced me the most was that my *kantor* was my *kuartu*—my bedroom. That was where I worked, not on the stage. My office didn't have a big screen like an ordinary *kantor*, but I did have a big mirror where I used to sit or stand in front of it and immerse myself in my work. My work was to laugh as an actor, to smile as an actor, to cry as an actor, to dance as an actor, to speak as an actor, to live as an actor. The phrase 'as an actor' was very important because, on the stage, I was not who I really was. My real name is João, but this name would change every week as the shows began. And I grew accustomed to it.

As an actor, you had so many names that sometimes you didn't really care which one was the real one. But your name was just a small thing. More than that, you had your feelings, expressions, moves, and more—all of which were totally not yours. Confused? Yes, sometimes I was. To be an actor, you had to learn 'new' feelings, expressions, moves, and more that were, in fact, natural



to you and had to feel natural. But as an actor, you knew more about ‘new’ things in life. For example, you had to be a villain or a hero, an impostor or a religious man—these were just ‘masks’ you wore so that you could earn the audience’s applause after the curtain closed or a few coins in your pocket after returning home for the weekend.

Then, at home, without clothes on, lying on the bed and staring blankly at the ceiling, maybe that was ‘me.’ The true ‘me.’

The real ‘me’ was only found inside my bedroom. When no one was around—no clothes for show, no ink on my face, no fake smiles, no fake eyes of surprise or excitement, and nothing of the stage—there I was, sitting naked in front of the mirror. Whether I looked at myself in the big mirror or rested my face on my knees, both were the same. The only thing I saw was darkness, yet it was still the real ‘me.’

After a while, I stood up again to learn new moves, new smiles, new feelings, new expressions, new things, and a new ‘me.’ Were there many ‘me’s inside of me that I had to discover? Maybe—the answer had to be maybe. I didn’t really know, but what I experienced was that I found new things in myself if I searched for them. At that time, I didn’t know exactly how many types of laughs or even simple smiles I had. But I really trained to earn them.

It turned out that I didn't know what my real smile was, what my genuine laughter sounded like, how I naturally responded to girls' greetings, how I walked in the street, how I looked at things, or even how I closed my eyes to sleep. But I believed the ones who truly knew these things about me were my parents and the aunties in my hometown. I knew they noticed something different in me compared to before—there must have been something. But they never once spoke about it. Perhaps they thought about how working in the office would change someone's behavior quickly, and I could most likely agree with that.

No matter where you worked, the office always changed you in some way: the way you walked, smiled, laughed, carried your bag, coughed, or even lifted a bottle of water to drink in public. But what changed people the most was the important question. I hoped that behaviors weren't changed because of money or privilege. Those two things weren't worthy of altering a person's behavior. I hoped that wasn't the case for me.

However, in my situation, that could still have been true. I needed money to pay my electricity bills and felt a little pride in the applause of the audience and the boss's smile at me.

Another question was what really changed in me. I thought it was the real question. Because I didn't change the way I respected people at all; nor did I change the

way I felt pity for the beggars I found in the streets; nor did I change the way I helped old men cross the road; nor did I change the way I secretly smiled at kids running kites in the vast green camp; nor did I change the way I honestly fell in love with the beautiful girl on the stage; nor did I change the way I watered the dying plant; nor did I change the way I desired to pick the most fragrant flower in the garden; nor did I change the way I truly fell in love with myself again and again.

I didn't change what was good in me; I kept it. Maybe I only changed the way I approached it. For example, I still fell in love with the girl beside me, but this time, I resolved to talk to her in a manner that made her confident that I truly had a fragrant flower to give her one day. I smiled, at least, at the beggars when I had nothing in my pocket. I held the old men's hands even tighter while crossing roads to feel their skin and juvenility. Sometimes, I even kissed the flower after watering it.

Contrarily, it could have been a misfortune if we truly changed from good to bad. I didn't see that much, but I noticed it a little bit in another office. My aunties had told me about it when I went to my hometown for holidays. Luckily, I worked in the office where everyone had the same amount of money in their pockets and the same privileges. Everyone was just an actor—only one boss. Other than that, there was a smart boy to write the scripts, but he wasn't an actor.

How beautiful it was to live with people around me having the same coins in their pockets, almost the same clothes, sometimes sharing the same names every week, the same made-up feelings, the same made-up smiles, laughter, and excitement. A beautiful world to live in. At least, that was my big world, and my room was my small world.

In the big world, people were really nice to each other, and sometimes it was a rule to be nice to each other because, if not, it could ruin the whole show. If one actor was not in good temper with another actor, then when both of them came to perform together, they would turn to expressing unexpected acts, because the 'real' feelings could not lie. This had happened many times, though at least it had not happened to me once.

But how about an actor falling in love with an actress in the same show? Would it ruin the show? This had happened to me once, and I was trustful enough to give the answer to that question.

This happened a few years ago when I had begun to grow accustomed to the show and its core. Then, one day, a new actress arrived and caught my eye. I knew that other colleagues had the same impression—why not? But it wasn't that big of a competition since most of them were already married and worked for their families. Only I, along with a few colleagues, remained in the world of madness about beauty and fantasy.

I truly fell in love with her, to the point that I nearly forgot life wasn't just about marrying a girl and living with her happily ever after like in fairy tales. But, after all, I started to act so strangely that I knew for certain my other colleagues noticed. Just as I noticed them—they acted slightly awkward around her. As I said, 'real' feelings never lie. But mine reached a different level until my boss clearly noticed it and warned me to keep an eye on my behavior; otherwise, I would be kicked out of the show.

That was terrible, as I had to fight for two things I really couldn't let go of easily. But, in the end, I managed to pull through. I had to keep my pocket full for holidays in my hometown, especially as, at that time, my mother was sick, as I learned from a call one night. I set that moment aside, and I hated myself a little for even thinking of letting go of my job, which was for my life and my parents, just to selfishly think of the girl.

Everything turned out well in the end. Our weekend show was applauded and drew even more attention for the next weekend show in another town.

I didn't really know if I had truly killed the feeling or just buried it alive. However, a few months later, I found out that the girl, Maria, had been kicked out. I couldn't sleep for nights thinking about this, let alone face myself in the big mirror. I hoped it wasn't because of me that

she had been kicked out, because I realized I still had the feeling inside me, and simply burying it didn't mean it would die. It rose again. Truly, the 'real' feelings were always alive.

A few days later, I came to know that she was then working in another show in a nearby town. A friend told me about it one drunken night, and it turned out that he also had the feeling inside him, which hurt him when the incident happened. It moved me, but at the same time, I felt happy that she hadn't lost her job as an actress and maybe (as I hoped) one day we could meet each other again. If that happened, I would ask her whether she still remembered the flower I picked in the park to give her or if she still kept it; about the green grass where we lay, looking at the vast sky and hearing the laughter of kids running with kites; the hug in the rain that wasn't born of my courage; and every poem I wrote to her every weekend after the show. Maria, a beautiful girl in my world.

It was sometimes a little awkward to see people caring about poems in a world ruled by phones. But I took no shame in this. Indeed, I still wrote millions of poems in my diary. It wasn't a waste of time but rather a time well spent. At the end of the day, as I sat alone on the balcony watching the sunset, millions of words crossed my mind, forcing me to pour them into ink in my notebook. Thus, the poems came to be. Let alone, when one fell in love, like I did with Maria. "An endless flowing river," I would

say. I felt everything in me spoke about her. My skin, my wet forehead, the awkwardness of my heartbeat, the uncontrollable gaze, the eyes that barely closed, and the blank look that seemed to see everything in the future and fantasy. Happily, Maria seemed to understand it well. She truly was a girl of my world, and everything between us fit perfectly.

So, it could have been a disaster when love bloomed between two people in the same show. However, for certain, there must have been a good side as well, which perhaps I had not experienced, but I was sure existed. It happened that sometimes, as I walked in the park back home, I would see couples walking hand in hand, talking, or some lying in the grass just like I had with Maria. By seeing this, at night as I lay in bed with my eyes open, staring at the ceiling, I imagined myself with the girl I would marry one day.

What would her name be? Would she have a beautiful smile like Maria? Or long black hair? Would she love Solidago as well, or just red roses? How about the poems? Would she smile with bright eyes if I read one to her? And, of course, would she be an actress like me? There were no answers to these questions—only the questions themselves came to me unbidden. You know, that's the ritual the grownups used to do before sleeping. The word wasn't exactly 'to think' but 'to question,' or more accurately, to let the questions cross their minds.

Of course, there was no need to answer them all—just let them be. Maybe those questions were then the ‘fairy tales’ for grownups, helping them sleep well, just like the stories kids are told. Sleeping, and as the alarm rang, another day waited for me to get up and be a grownup again. Maybe this repeated until one day I finally found another Maria to share the bed with. Who knew?

For now, I had at least a dog with me that gave me a purpose to stay at home for some time or to walk in the park without looking too much at other people’s lives. He is male. I had never given him a name before because he was brought from the hometown when he was already grown. He was given to me by my auntie Helena as a gift for finally becoming a grownup, to learn how to live alone and work in the office. She was the loudest of the aunties. Even from a long distance, after she saw me, she would immediately shout out loud until the neighbors got mad at her, then start hugging me, kissing my cheeks, and describing how much I had changed—how I had gotten fatter, become whiter, and grown more mature.

But, after all, I liked her. I thought she brought color to my return to the hometown. As the bus neared arrival, the first thing that came to my mind was her face, her voice in my ears, and a sense of affection. I would always go to her house first, which was close to ours, before going to see papa and mama with grandfather at the house next door. Another good thing about her was



that she really loved me, just like her own son. Maybe it was because her sons were married and lived far away in another town. They would only come with their children during Christmas and the day after New Year. Her grandchildren barely played with auntie Helena because they were afraid of her and not accustomed to her ways. It seemed they weren't as close to her as I was.

Every time I left to go back to the city, she would secretly place some money in my hand with a smile. The funny thing was, she would seriously ask me when I would bring my girl to the hometown. I used to laugh, and she would try to cover my mouth. It seemed like she was serious as she grew older. Maybe she wanted to see my girl.

And so, one day she gave me the dog. Since then, I just called him the way ordinary dogs are called—‘ku ku ku’—because I didn't know the name he had been called since he was little. He must have been accustomed to only that specific name, and I didn't bother to ask my auntie about it every time I went to my hometown for holidays. He still remembered his ‘real’ owner (my auntie), as he wagged his tail every time they met. But as for his name, I guessed my auntie had forgotten it as well. I never heard her mention his name again after that.

\*

A few months later, I started to call him ‘Mar,’ adopted from Maria but in the male version. At first, he didn't seem

to respond, but I noticed that after a few months, he began to accept that new name when I called him for dinner. Sometimes, I thought that if one day I married a girl—another Maria—maybe I should make up some stories about the name of my only dog. I might say it was the name of an anime hero I used to watch as a kid (I knew girls weren't interested in anime, so she wouldn't ask more about it), or maybe say it was the name of one of my old friends, which would work well as a joke (girls loved jokes for real).

Luckily, Mar was not a dog of the city who always wanted a rich owner with fancy food to eat. When I got home, I would stop by a nearby tent close to my rented house to buy two packs of rice with some meat and carrots. It was the same menu every night. I noticed that not many people went there to buy food from the old lady, who looked about the same age as my grandmother. But I did—I always bought there every night. Maybe she felt happy knowing that every night at least one man always walked by to buy two packs of rice. Two—perhaps she thought one was for me and the other for my wife. I didn't know, but the reality was that one was for Mar, my beloved friend who had watched me many times naked in front of the mirror, doing mad things that people appreciated only on the stage. Once the curtain fell, those were just mad things for a normal person to do.

It was a little strange to tell people, especially after I found out her name was the same as my loudest auntie,

Helena, that “my dog eats the same meal as me.” People would certainly laugh or secretly wonder how mad I was to do such a thing. In ordinary life, dogs ate waste, leftovers from the meals we ate—the bones and scraps. Or worse, expired food and forgotten rice in bags, no longer good to eat because of the smell. But I didn’t do that to Mar. He was truly my friend, and more than ever, he became part of my life—knowing Maria, knowing my naked self, my stupidity in front of the mirror, the days I pretended to be in good health, and the nights I screamed out of depression and stress. Only Mar knew these things. No one else—not my parents, my aunties, auntie Helena, Maria, my fat boss, or my colleagues who were only interested in football and new wine brands in the city.

After all, that old woman, whose name was also Helena, I always greeted her with “Good evening auntie Helena. *Boa noite tia* Helena.” I had grown accustomed to it. Sometimes, I felt very sorry for her. At her age, she should have been resting at home, watching TV and drinking milk. Instead, she had to sacrifice herself every night, waiting for someone to buy her packed rice with the same daily menu—a little piece of beef and sliced carrots. But maybe, just as I had grown accustomed to it, I loved it so much. And I thought Mar did too. Sometimes, on weekends when my pocket was more than full, I would add some extra coins, and she would smile at me. No words were exchanged—just a smile.

I felt happy sharing kindness with others, especially those with little hope. I remembered one night when I brought Maria there to eat together, with Mar at our side, eating his own meal. I believed *tia* Helena noticed it all, and how suddenly, I came back to normal with just two packs again. Maybe she even noticed the joy in my face during those times with Maria by my side and until I returned to being the person I was before. I loved that.

Sometimes, as I walked by, I wondered, “Who is she fighting for?” There must have been someone behind her for whom she had been fighting. It could have been her children, her sick husband, or sadly, her own lonely self. I didn’t know, and I didn’t want to ask. But she worked so hard, and I was proud of her.

Sometimes, I would walk by and see a mother and her three or four children early in the morning, searching through the streets’ garbage for cans that could be turned into small amounts of money. They seemed happy whenever they found some and did it when fewer people were around. I didn’t know the exact reason—perhaps it was due to shame or something else beyond my judgment. In the evenings, there was always an old man with a stick picking cans from the garbage as well. Both of them did the same thing, but in very different worlds—a woman who fought, and a man who fought.

I didn’t want to spread stereotypes, but I believed it was true and honest to see them from different perspectives.

Perhaps the woman with her children had something to do with her husband—maybe he was already dead, sick for some reason, or sadly an irresponsible father who ran off with another woman. Or maybe he was just a drunk man who wanted to be fed while watching TV all day. As for the old man, I didn't know why he had no one beside him. Maybe he had no children—or what about a wife? Or perhaps he didn't want the shame of picking garbage to be felt by them. Or maybe both—the woman with her kids in the morning and the old man in the evening—were a couple. Who knew? A family surviving on garbage could exist—why not? But more accurately, they were a family fighting for life, while some people gave up on life and committed suicide everywhere.

I loved seeing people fighting for life. They knew life was worth living. After all, we were all just ordinary people fighting for life, each in different ways. Sometimes, others tried to look down on people but suffered the same struggles that no one knew. Some struggles were visible, while others were hidden—some were fought on the streets, others in locked bedrooms.

\*

Arriving at home, I prepared two plates—one for myself and another for Mar. He knew my schedule; the whole day after I left home, he would wander around the neighborhood, doing his own things. But at night, before

I got home, he would already be sitting in front of the door, his tail wagging excitedly. He would run toward me as I got close. “Mar, Mar,” I’d say, taming his head as he closed his eyes for this.

We ate together while watching TV—boring programs, nonsense movies, meaningful animes, horror cartoons, and sometimes just people talking—while I fell asleep unconsciously on the couch, chatted with friends, or took calls from auntie Helena on weekends, asking about my job and my girl. Same questions, same answers—almost for ten years. But she never got bored doing this repeatedly.

Honestly, sometimes I intentionally avoided her calls just to focus on my own things, or to make it seem like I had something meaningful to do with my life other than taking phone calls. Later, I would call her back and apologize, making justifications, excuses, and lies. Life was just like that sometimes—you had to act like you valued your time, making people wonder about you and your life, and spouting nonsense about your private life. Just to show that you had a life.

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And talking about murals, there was a long line of walls, old ones, that I walked by as I went to the church every Sunday. A colorful line of walls formed in sequence. They were mostly abstract images. Some of them were difficult

to understand: a bird with two human mouths; a man with many eyes on his face; girls with horns and tails; a big tree bearing fruits that were babies; a crying, lonely child with white hair; and so on. They were sometimes creepy, but I had heard that those images had their own meaning, and anyone who tried to understand them had the right to claim what the true meaning was, other than the artist himself.

Maybe, I guessed, even the artist didn't know what he was painting—perhaps just to attract the eyes of those walking by. Or maybe it was painted intentionally but left without meaning because it was simply the artist's dream the night before, one that woke him up to find his ink can still had enough to paint some more. The walls became colorful, with their names scribbled below. Actually, the names were awkward and really difficult to read, adding to their mystery.

People started wondering if extraterrestrial beings were responsible for these out-of-the-box creations, or if they were the work of ghosts revealing their existence. Or perhaps the artist was haunted by a ghost that made him wake up at midnight to grab her spray paint and start painting the walls while no one was watching, only for him to wake up in the morning with no memory of what had happened the night before, or who had really painted the colorful baby with long sharp teeth on the wall with awkward names below. Who knew? Anything could happen in the blink of an eye.

But the problem was that these mysterious walls formed a line right along the path to the church. How terrifying it was to feel like passing through hell before going to heaven in the church, then returning to the world through the path of hell again. Perhaps the artist thought of that metaphor—"the path to heaven feels like hell." But it wasn't comfortable, especially for the kids.

What about the night mass, when these strange images could turn into the kids' nightmares, making them forget about fairy tales? And the priest in the church, teaching about heaven and people's sins. And the angels who seemed more real in people with tattoos and corruptors in jail. On that day, a kid slowly lost interest in fairy tales—no longer captivated by stories of wonderlands and princesses where villains always died in the end. He began to realize what the world truly looked like, where almost everyone was both a villain and a hero at the same time.

There were days when a man with a tattoo saved a girl from a car accident. Another time, police officers detained him for killing an innocent grandma in the neighborhood to steal her jewels. And then, there were moments of seeing police officers with the same tattoos as the criminal on their shoulders. Were they in the same gang? Or was the stolen jewel in the hands of the police officer, while the criminal had been moved to another town to pretend to be an innocent police officer, catching another robber with the same tattoo the next day?



And maybe, just maybe, another grandma, who used to walk alone with rosary beads in her right hand, died again and went to heaven once more.

These kinds of things were not part of the reality in the hometown where I lived and grew up as a beloved son of my parents and auntie Helena. (I was not sure about being the favorite grandchild of grandpa José.) In the hometown, I didn't find any murals with strange images around. Was it because there were no artists in the hometown; or no madmen doing nonsense things; or no men haunted by ghosts at midnight; no spray paint cans; or because there were almost no men who knew how to read and write, even their own names? All of these could have been true.

Indeed, there were no such absurd things in the hometown. People just cared about their farms, animals, sheep for the shepherds; the weather—whether it was normal or not; the rising price of rice sacks without reason; who would marry whom; the next *Lia-na'in*, and so on. But there were still some artistic creations I grew up accustomed to, like the statues, the artistic lines in traditional houses, and the *Knua*, whose meaning only the *Lia-na'in* knew. No one knew the artists behind them, as they had been made many years ago but were still preserved to this day. The meanings had been explained and passed down from generation to generation.

Unlike the murals in the city, these artistic creations were considered sacred and not to be misjudged or perceived negatively. They were sacred for reasons I didn't really know—maybe similar to the city artists, where an old artist might have been haunted by spiritual beings that woke him up at midnight to craft the woods. By the time the sun rose the next morning, people would come, kneel down, and praise some invisible supreme being who had seemingly crafted it out of nowhere.

I didn't know whether those meanings were true or not, but the *Lia-na'in* had the right to define them and was trusted because people believed he was blessed by the supreme being who crafted the woods one night while everyone was sleeping. What would a *Lia-na'in* feel? Maybe he truly was the one who crafted it and knew how to explain it in ways that were logical, acceptable, and full of wonder and praise.

And about stealing jewels, in the hometown, almost everyone had a small amount of jewels in their home. However, there were many in the *Knua*, but they were sacred, just like the crafted lines and statues. I didn't know the story behind the sacred gold (*osann-mean lulik*), but they were considered that way. Even seeing them was rare, let alone touching them, which was completely forbidden. They were *lulik* and were kept there until one day they mysteriously disappeared, and people had to gather together to hold a big celebration to ask the spirit who hid them to return them again.

But who truly knew if the *lulik* gold really disappeared? Only the *Lia-na'in* knew and announced the missing items. After sacrificing many animals, dancing, and chanting for seven nights, on the early morning of the seventh day, the *Lia-na'in* would go up to the *Knua* to check on the missing *lulik* gold. Then, out of nowhere, they would be there again, as if by magic. He would climb down and announce that everything had been returned, and people would begin to praise that spirit for its generosity.

But what kind of 'generous' spirit was this? A spirit that didn't show any generosity at all. He hid the *lulik* gold for no reason and returned them just to revel in the pride of being praised by the people for seven nights, after the slaughtering of many buffalos that went to waste. It wasn't like the story of heroes in fairy tales, where a villain stole the princess and a tall, handsome man rescued her with courage and power. In this case, the villain and the hero were the same person that everyone praised. Was it worse or the same as the police officer with the gang tattoo on his shoulder? Maybe it was *lulik* to answer that question.

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But truly, I was happy to grow up with culture, with some *lulik* traditions. This made it easy for me to bow down in front of my boss, to listen to my married colleagues, to kiss the hand of my parents, and to kiss my auntie Helena's

cheek, to greet another auntie Helena who sold the same menu every night, to not kiss Maria, to offer my seat to the old men who struggled to stand for a long time on the bus, to speak in a low voice on the bus while a young boy with eyeglasses next to me read his thick book, to smile first at the beggars on the street, to help the old woman cross the road, to give Mar the same meal as mine; to always reply to people's chats, to apologize to auntie Helena for avoiding her phone calls; to return home during holidays; to not ask my papa and mama for tips, even when I only had enough money for the bus back home, leaving nothing for food or electricity bills; to lower my TV volume when the neighbors were sleeping; and to not gossip about others' lives. These things made me a grownup man, not just a beloved boy of Auntie Helena.

But after all, that is also the reason why I still went to mass every Sunday. I believed that something changed in me every time I attended mass and left the church gates with Mar. I brought Mar with me every Sunday to mass. He luckily knew how *lulik* the church was. I didn't know for sure, but maybe he assimilated it with the *Knua* in the hometown where he grew up. He would sit or sleep right at my feet. That's why I used to sit in the last row in the church, so it wouldn't distract people. Or, sometimes, when I was late, I would sit outside with him in the garden—a beautiful garden that refreshed the eyes while listening to the priest preach.

Obviously, beyond the priest talking about how heaven looks like and people's sins, he also spoke about love and God's love. I loved hearing that. Love was a very earthly and human thing that anyone could experience—just like my love for Mar, or Maria, or the beggars, or the old man on the bus, the old woman in the street, the two aunties with the same name but different lives (Helena), my papa and mama, grandpa José, and even my naked self in front of the big mirror. Love was deeply human.

After the mass ended, Mar and I would go to the park, walking around, hanging out like people do—like couples do. I walked side by side with him through the park, watching people having picnics—happy families spending time together, parents and their children. The parents sat on the green grass while their kids flew kites or chased each other like cats and mice. Laughter filled the park, surrounded by fragrant, beautiful flowers.

Some couples in love reminded me of Maria. They sat on benches, holding each other and reciting beautiful poems the world would admire, or they walked around, holding hands tightly, just like I walked with Mar. “How beautiful would the world be if everyone has the time to talk to each other and recite beautiful poems,” I thought. The park on weekends was like heaven amidst the chaos—a lovely heaven in a cruel world. But leaving it brought me back to reality, a world filled with jobs and bosses. It felt so wonderful to stay there, yet time always

seemed too short. When we are happy, we don't want to leave our world, or we wish time could slow down.

More than happiness, it is love that binds men to time and space. If I found love in a certain place, I wouldn't care much about time. And when I found love in a certain moment, any place I was in would feel like happiness.

Some men sat there to read. I often wondered why those reading always looked so professional in their suits, as though they were working in an office, even on weekends. While most people left office matters behind to live their real lives, these suited men still managed to sneak into their office worlds. They sat reading newspapers meticulously, as if even a single word couldn't escape their notice. Mostly older men. Younger men, on the other hand, carried thick books—sometimes two—and sat reading.

There was a difference between the old men and the young men in both what they read and how they read. These days, I didn't read much. I remembered starting to read long texts at auntie Helena's house when I was twelve or thirteen. Only auntie Helena had studied a little in school before the war ravaged the country. As the eldest sibling, she was chosen to go to school, while the family saved money for other necessities.

Though she only completed senior high school in the hometown, she was quite accomplished for the village.

Now she taught at a school and was one of the oldest and most famous teachers in the hometown. She encouraged all her nieces and nephews to pursue education, and I was lucky enough to step into the city and work in an office. She kept books at her house, which I often read during visits. The first long text I read wasn't a fairy tale—those were usually short—it was about the history of the war that had closed schools, cutting her education short at senior high school.

I loved those stories; they felt far more real than fairy tales. That day, I began losing interest in fairy tales, discovering instead stories of history, of grown-ups, of reality. Auntie Helena told me I could learn more about these real stories after finishing senior high school and moving to the city.

But before I could complete high school, my papa became seriously ill, forcing me to move to the city earlier with a *tiu* (uncle) who was my papa's friend. Auntie Helena resisted, knowing how much I loved studying history, but papa was adamant. So, I ended up following uncle Tino to the city. I spent nearly two years living with him until he decided to return to the hometown, leaving me alone in a rented house.

The good thing was that uncle Tino introduced me to *Halakan*, the theater I now work in. At the time, it was a fledgling production, only two years old, desperately

needing new players. It was through uncle Tino, a close friend of my current boss, *tiu* Rangel, that I joined the theater so effortlessly. Uncle Tino taught me to shed my clothes every night before the mirror to learn ‘new’ feelings, moves, smiles, and expressions.

In the first months, he took training me very seriously. We practiced every night and sometimes through the whole night for weekend shows, especially those with large audiences. He, being experienced, devoted himself to preparing me. His goal was to make me so polished that when he was no longer around, I wouldn’t disgrace *tiu* Rangel by seeming like a useless actor introduced to the theater. It was such a misfortune for him, yet he gave me everything.

But for me, it was truly worth it that, even after he was no longer around, I could still see the boss’s smile every time the show ended. Maybe *tiu* Tino would have been so proud to hear about this good news reaching his ears back in the hometown. He actually lived not too far from our hometown, just about an hour away. But the problem was that, in order to get there, one had to walk due to the inaccessibility of the roads leading there.

It must have been a great fortune for him to decide to leave his remote hometown and go to the city—such a leap of joy. I didn’t even ask how it was possible for him to make such a leap, but I knew it must have been



something surprising and joyful. Just like my own story, which I never imagined could happen this way. At first, it seemed like a misfortune, but then I began to see the bigger picture—and so did my beloved ones, especially auntie Helena. Papa was right when he said, “You should go out sometimes to grow.”

And so, every time Mar and I spent the whole day in the park, at night we had a little time to lay down on the grass and wonder at the millions upon millions of stars twinkling in the sky. I could see all those memories in the sky and reflect on how far I had come to reach this moment. I remembered a little book that auntie Helena once gave me, which I still kept on my desk, though for years I never opened it or leafed through even a single page. I had lost my interest in books, particularly in history.

I guessed the book was about history, as the cover suggested—a man standing with a gun in his right hand. But I had no interest anymore, as I now saw my ‘real book’ as my own life. Perhaps auntie Helena thought the book might rekindle my desire to continue my studies, using the savings I had. But that wasn’t the case. I began to see my life as a ‘real’ story, a book I was writing, though it still lacked a fixed title. I hoped that, when the book ended one day, whoever read it would be inspired to write their own story well. That was what I cared about: to write.

Not like the drunk men and women, Mar and I often met on our way home at night. They sat in the streets, half-clothed, singing trending songs without clarity, their voices muddled by the empty bottles lying around them. I didn't know what their books would be titled when they ended, or if they gave them to someone to read. Would they inspire others to do something good in life or to value life? I didn't know. Life is a book to be read, indeed.

My life is also a book, an unfinished book that I hope one day, when it reaches its last page, someone who will hold it—whoever they are—might find fire between the lines and verses that burns their spirit to write their own story better. But a good story, a good book isn't only about stars in the sky, flowers in the garden, couples walking hand in hand, or beautiful dreams. It is truly also about things that are contrary. Indeed, what made a story, a book beautiful, is that sometimes the hero gets wounded or the flower starts dying because the owner loses interest in watering it, or the nights seem to grow darker, or the couples' hands begin to loosen, or the nights are sleepless because of ghosts that come to haunt.

Yes, that was what happened to me one night as we walked back home alone in the midnight streets. Mar led me to a dark corner in the street. He smelled something—or someone—or a flower that turned a corner in my life, his life, our lives.

## PART II

We found her—a girl or a woman? Lying in the dark corner of the street with barely enough light, I was startled by the sight. Mar had run suspiciously into the shadowed area, and I followed him eagerly as he stopped at that corner. She seemed to be half-dying, I guessed, with untidy hair covering her entire face, leaving it unrecognizable. But that wasn't the most important thing to consider. The first question was—what should I do when faced with an unknown girl who appeared to be dying?

She wore black dress. How strange it was to find a girl dressed entirely in black, with her heels not on her feet but scattered nearby. My heart raced faster, and I froze for a while, standing there like a statue, doing nothing but staring at this mystery. Several minutes passed before I started looking around, realizing that no one else was in the midnight street. Only the yellow light from the lampposts illuminated the area, and I could hear some dogs rummaging through garbage for food scraps.

I thought of calling an ambulance immediately, but when I checked my pocket, I realized I hadn't brought my phone. As always, I left it behind when I went out, not wanting to be bothered by notifications while walking through the streets or lying on the grass in the park, surrounded by fragrant flowers and cheerful people.

“What should I do now?” I wondered. My heart was still racing. “Should I leave the girl here and hope that

someone else will pass by in the morning and call an ambulance? Why should I take responsibility for this? Why should I worry about it? Maybe she's just another girl who spent the weekend drunk with men and, barely able to walk, resolved to sleep in the corner, waiting for the morning to sober up and return to normal. Let her be that way. I should go home now; it's late, the air is growing colder, and I don't have a jacket on."

"How about bringing her home while waiting for the morning to come so she could go home?" I instantly had a second thought. "But what if someone finds me and thinks I'm a robber, or my neighbors see me as one of those men who go to clubs on weekend nights and bring home bad girls? What would people think about the safety of that poor, dying girl?"

Without thinking too long, I lifted my right foot and started heading home, trying not to dwell on the situation. I walked back as if nothing had happened, and I could sense Mar following me, seemingly forgetting what he had just smelled and found minutes ago. After a few paces, I suddenly stopped and exhaled deeply, forming smoke in the cold air. I stood still, but Mar continued running ahead to pee on the lampposts in the street.

What happened to me? What made me stop again? It was the image of Maria's beautiful smile that popped into my mind, as if it were telling me to do something

against my will. I didn't know much about such things, but it truly affected me, compelling me to return to the place I had been just minutes ago.

I walked back to the dimly lit corner where the girl lay, still not knowing who she was or how she had ended up there. Without much thought, I moved her, and she didn't respond. I checked her breath—she was still alive, as I had hoped. I didn't want any nightmares to come true. So, I lifted her limp body like a living statue. She was heavy, even though she wasn't particularly large. But as usual, when people are dying or unconscious, they always seem heavier than those who are alive—I don't know why.

As I lifted her, I noticed a half-empty bottle of some kind of yellow alcohol lying nearby. I sighed and decided not to think about it. I left her pair of shoes and the bottle there, focusing only on carrying the girl. I walked at a moderate pace, trying to act as normal as possible so that if anyone saw me, they wouldn't suspect anything sinister. Occasionally, I glanced around to see if anyone was spying on me from afar, thinking I might ask for help if needed.

But after a few meters, I began to sweat and grew tired of pretending. The useless and childish drama wore me out. I started walking normally and as quickly as possible to reach home. When I arrived, the neighborhood was

quiet—everyone was in a deep sleep. Only I stood there, my shirt soaked with sweat, just like my forehead and armpits. Mar, with no effort at all, was full of energy. I hoped he wasn't thinking something I feared—that this girl was Maria, or another drunk Maria I had brought home.

I had never done anything like this before. It was completely out of character for me to bring home a girl, let alone a drunk one. I propped her against the wall, unlocked the door, and carried her inside. I laid her on the couch in front of the TV, letting her sleep there unconsciously. I wasn't okay with her smell or the odor of the liquids she had likely consumed, whether alone or with irresponsible men from the weekend nightclubs in town.

Then, I signaled Mar to sleep on his pillow, and I also lay on the bed, exhausted. As usual, out of tiredness, I would fall asleep immediately and dream about tomorrow's stage, the next show, and big audiences. But I woke up again, not feeling at ease. I walked toward her, lifted her to the bed, covered her with a mantle, and decided to sleep on the couch instead. I thought it was better to treat a girl that way, even a stranger.

I slept on the couch and set the alarm for six in the morning, marking the start of a new week. I woke up just five minutes before the alarm was about to ring, turned it off, got up, made the sign of the cross, and said a morning

prayer. She was still sound asleep on the bed, and so was Mar. I went to take a shower, changed my clothes, and got ready to leave.

I thought about waking her up but decided against it. Instead, I left the door unlocked and let Mar stay inside, so when she woke up, she could leave as she wished. Also, I hoped Mar's presence might scare her a little if she attempted anything unexpected. Then, I set off for the day. I also brought along my rarely used jacket, planning to wear it when I returned home if the night grew cooler.

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I like first days: the first day of the week, the month, the year, the first day of a job, or the first date with Maria. Even the first day of my life—my birthday, which no one has celebrated for years since I became a grown-up. But I know it and celebrate it with Mar in the room and with a phone call from auntie Helena, who marks it clearly in her mind. I appreciate that. First days remind us of the new things in life that are worth celebrating and living to the fullest. Life is meant to be lived 'once.' Perhaps 'first' isn't the right word here; life must also be lived to the full. The 'first' and the 'only once' moments are so special in life that if we walk too fast, we might not value them as they deserve to be.

I think António understood this better. He knew life should be lived in such a way that you'll one day be



grateful for it. Days and nights worth valuing. I believe life rewards those who value it wholeheartedly because life counts on every human who walks the earth. The plant you watered tirelessly will one day bear fruit that ends your years of hunger. Truly, nothing in this world is as just as life itself. It never overlooks the tears and sweat you've shed—even when no one knows about them. Life witnesses everything closely, recording it meticulously in a book with your name on the cover. How beautiful life is, ensuring no one feels like a stranger to their own efforts and success. Though everyone walks different paths, we all have the same destination. Those who fight genuinely always find themselves in a garden filled with blooming flowers, unlike those who waste their weekends in clubs or spend their days stealing jewels from old grandmas and carrying matching tattoos. They must share the same dark corner of the street.

António taught me so much about life—not by teaching directly, but by simply being someone I could learn from. Sometimes, teachers don't need to teach; their presence is enough for students to learn. I was lucky to have someone like him in my life to learn from. I still remember how meaningfully and purposefully he spent his days and nights. He said his story was almost the same as mine. He came from a remote hometown to the city, 'searching for light' in the dark, searching for life in a lifeless valley.

When you have nothing, you fight as if life isn't on your side. You trust no luck—only the tears and sweat you hope will form a life-giving lake, not just for yourself but for others who cross your path, like me. Antônio arrived in the city knowing no one, trusting only that the One above had something in store for him. He believed he wouldn't die before seeing the light he had been searching for. Such a commitment! He eventually found a family who took him in, not because they were blood relatives, but because they came from the same hometown. In such moments, shared origins are enough to create the feeling of 'family.'

He began performing magic tricks in public spaces for this family. His task was to bluff and attract crowds to the show, but it didn't bring him happiness or peace. Like me, he was a man of culture, and deceiving others during the day haunted his nights. He wasn't okay with manipulating people for money. That wasn't who he was—not even a man with nothing in his pocket. For him, money wasn't worth changing someone's life or character for the worse.

After months of unease, Antônio decided to leave this job and move on, knowing it also meant losing his accommodation. He chose peace over comfort. In time, he became a cleaner, and it was during this phase that he met *tiu* Rangel, who owned the stage that gave life to him—and eventually to me as well. Antônio became an

actor, and after four years, we met. He was the first person to approach me, perhaps noticing my nervousness and low self-esteem. Maybe our shared story connected us instinctively—stories do have a way of bringing people together.

He was incredibly open, making it easy for someone like me—who struggled to make friends—to enter his world. He worked tirelessly; I could sense it. After a full day of training at *Halakan* theater, he worked nights at a nearby coffee shop. He said he earned more money there than at the theater, as it was a famous spot crowded at night, especially on weekends. Occasionally, he would invite Mar and me to the coffee shop, treating us to everything. We talked a lot about life, the stage, audiences, family, colleagues, and bosses.

Once, I asked him why he didn't leave the theater to focus on the coffee shop, where he could earn more money. He laughed at my confusion and said, "It's about 'being' an actor, not filling your pocket." He explained that being an actor was special—it allowed you to discover countless lives within yourself that most people could never experience. He said, "You discover you can laugh differently every day by choice, move in endless ways, express yourself fully, stand on a stage before hundreds of people, make them laugh or cry, love, sing, and truly live—regardless of how many days you have left in this beautiful yet cruel world."

He added, “It’s about ‘being’ an actor, not just ‘doing’ acting on stage. Living as an actor is the most authentic life to live—a life where you have nothing to hide and everything to show. You can become anything on the stage. An actor can be a doctor, while a doctor rarely becomes a politician. An actor can be a president, while the president watches and laughs from the audience.”

That’s how I fell in love with being an actor. I wish I had known earlier that acting was the most precious job in the world. I wouldn’t have wasted time struggling with complex math problems at school, reading long historical texts at auntie Helena’s house, or keeping the history book she gave me—now just a home for dust and memories.

But I also believe that everything in the past was part of a bigger picture that led me to this stage. My love for reading history taught me patience for long scripts and new words. Staying up late to prepare for math class prepared me for late-night script practices. Even the unread book from auntie Helena taught me that not all precious things are useful—not all important things to me are important to others, and what’s precious now might not be tomorrow.

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The one thing I find strange is that António has never returned to his hometown, even during holidays.

It's so unlike me. I've wondered why but never asked. I don't know what happened before he came to the city or what changed him. I just hope it isn't about money. He once taught me, "Money isn't worthy enough to change a person's life." Money shouldn't be a ghost that haunts someone into changing who they are.

Life is like a cup of coffee and milk. Some get more coffee, some more milk. But the important thing is how we drink it—savoring every sip until the cup is empty and we're ready to leave the café.

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So, I went home after the rain had been falling for about three hours at night. I should have waited for it to stop before heading home, but it seemed like there was no sign of change—it might not stop until the next day. I decided to leave anyway, even though the rain was still heavy. I noticed that the streets were beginning to flood, a few inches deep, and I resigned myself to getting my shoes wet. I didn't have an umbrella, either.

Some colleagues were still at the theater, waiting and chilling, laughing together. I noticed António had probably already left for his night job, and I also needed to leave—for Mar, hungry Mar, perhaps. I didn't expect auntie Helena to still be in the streets selling her packages of rice, so I grabbed two packs of biscuits and headed home, hoping for a full dinner.

I carried the two packs of biscuits and used my jacket to shield my head while running home at a fast pace, not bothering to look around much. I focused on my path and didn't care about the water seeping into my shoes, making them uncomfortable for my toes. The streets were eerily empty—only a few beggars were sleeping soundly at the bus station. The sound of fireworks from drainage works filled the night.

When I arrived home, I was surprised to find Mar was not at the door, sitting and waiting for me as usual. I hung my wet jacket outside, along with my soaked socks and water-filled shoes. Trembling from the cold, I walked inside and was startled to find the door unlocked. Then I remembered I hadn't locked it in the morning, though the reason was slipping my mind. The lights were on, which was unusual.

As I placed my right foot inside, Mar ran toward me with his tail wagging. He had been waiting for me inside, after all. I walked carefully to avoid slipping, but the sound of the TV slowed my pace all of a sudden. As I approached, I sensed something was off. How could Mar be so calm?

From the back of the room, I saw the TV on, displaying programs I had never watched—maybe news about the trending topics of the week. And then, a person? That lady? She was lying on the couch, sleeping soundly. I

approached to turn off the TV and to make sure she was truly asleep. Before I touched her, I was certain she was deeply asleep.

To my surprise, she was wearing my sport shirt—an Argentina jersey António had given me when we watched the World Cup final between Argentina and France together. She was also wearing my shorts. And the book! She was holding the history book auntie Helena had given me a couple of years ago. I didn't know what I was feeling or what I should do. Maybe she had been reading the book and fell asleep. Mar had also joined her on the couch, sleeping beside her instead of on his pillow. I had never taught Mar to do such a thing, but it seemed like he had found a new friend.

I placed the biscuits on the table and went to the bathroom to change my clothes. Upon returning, I was surprised to see my untidy wardrobe had been neatly organized. As I looked around, I realized everything had been cleaned and arranged without me noticing—the chairs around the table were neatly placed; my messy bed had been tidied; the garbage bin, once full of papers, was now empty; the messy kitchen was spotless; the floor had been cleaned; the bathroom was free of shampoo containers; the dust-covered book was now in her hands; and Mar seemed to have taken a bath—perhaps.

But there was one thing that left me unhappy—the big mirror had been placed in the bathroom. Why do

girls always think mirrors should be in the bathroom? Did she think it was just an ordinary mirror? For me, no—it was not just a mirror; it was my life. Through it, I found myself—millions of versions of me waiting to be discovered. I had grown accustomed to it being beside my bed for the past ten years.

I felt a little anger but managed to control it. After taking my bath, I carefully returned the mirror to its rightful place beside my bed. It was slightly difficult to move it, and I couldn't imagine how she had done it. I cleaned the mirror, wiping away the wet surface. Fortunately, there were no signs of damage. If there had been, I wouldn't have been able to contain my anger.

I sat eating biscuits at the table, watching her sleep soundly on the couch, unmoved. Mar didn't wake up to eat either, which puzzled me. The rain continued to pour heavily, accompanied by roaring thunder—a sign it might stop several hours later. Hungry and unable to bear the cold, I focused on finishing my biscuits while checking rare messages on my phone. Sleepiness and exhaustion overwhelmed me, so I went to bed without exchanging any words with the stranger girl or trying to unravel the mystery of her presence. I let everything unfold naturally, feeling no urgency to wake her up or discuss what had transpired. I set my alarm and fell asleep soundly, avoiding overthinking.



Still, thoughts about the mysterious girl lingered. Why had she chosen to stay rather than find her way home? Was she okay with it? Was she aware of how awkward it was to stay at a stranger's house without consent? Who was she? Did she have a family? A home? Or was she a girl of the night, drinking until she couldn't find her way to either? It felt unacceptable, yet there she was.

What little I knew about her painted an unusual picture—dressed entirely in black, possibly intoxicated, and lying unconscious in a half-dark corner of the street. I had chosen to help her, seeing no one else around. With good intentions, I brought her home, hoping to care for her while she was unconscious. My expectation was that, come morning, she would return to wherever she belonged.

Instead, a stormy night of rain and thunder revealed surprises. She stayed, wearing my favorite Argentina jersey from Antônio and convincing Mar of her character, making him friendly enough to sleep beside her even while hungry. She tidied my house and room, which was thoughtful, but her disregard for the placement of my big mirror stirred my wrath. That mirror was not just furniture—it was my life, my reflection, my discovery.

That's all I knew—not much beyond that. I could only hope for clarity the next day. Perhaps she would leave, and everything would return to normal, as it always had.

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In the morning, the alarm rang, yet my eyelids felt too heavy to lift. With much effort, I finally sat up, turned off the alarm, and began mumbling my routine prayers. Eyes still closed and mind half-conscious, the words came out flawlessly—an effect of repetition over time.

Rising from bed without a second thought, I headed to the bathroom for a fresh start—brushing teeth, cleansing, and practicing my long-standing ritual. Smiling at my reflection. This small exercise had become ingrained in me, stemming from advice I once heard, perhaps from an anime long ago: “The first thing you do each morning sets the tone for your day.” Though I couldn’t quite recall who said it, I carried that idea forward, even before meeting Maria.

And truly, the ritual held a sense of hope, even though life often proved otherwise. There’s no such thing as ‘fully’ happy days in life’s entirety. Some days are simply meant to be bad—they add depth and vibrancy to life’s palette. I’ve come to appreciate the honesty of this dynamic. A canvas painted only in white would lack contrast; gray, I believe, is the truest and most balanced color.

Returning to the mirror, you found the unexpected note—a detail that immediately shifted the morning into uncertainty and concern. The girl, once a stranger, now left behind a fragment of her presence, adding to the mystery with her words, “Thank you, Mar.” The

assumption that your name was Mar hinted at her reading something during her time in your home, and it sparked a thread of thoughts—what exactly did she come across?

My pacing through the kitchen and bathroom highlighted the growing worry, especially with Mar absent from his usual spots. It's clear that this moment carried weight for you—a blend of unease and attachment. The morning, filled with silence and wind drifting through empty streets, set the backdrop for your search. When calls for Mar went unanswered, the concern grew as the realization began to set in.

The mystery surrounding the girl and Mar's whereabouts lingered in the air. It's a thought-provoking moment—how did everything change so swiftly in a matter of hours? And as you settled with that note, holding on to it for clues and wondering what might have transpired, it's evident that this day holds unexpected challenges. Life, it seems, rarely unfolds with clear answers. All that remains now is your effort to piece it together and seek resolution.

My heart raced with growing worry as I paused in the middle of the room, shouting Mar's name into the quiet. Yet, no sound of his eager paws or familiar presence came to calm my nerves. Feeling the weight of the silence, I rushed to open the door and ventured outside, calling for him without heed to the neighbors likely deep in their early-morning rest.

In the distance, a cluster of dogs rummaged through garbage, their movements lit faintly by the streetlights. Desperation propelled me forward as I ran toward them, hoping Mar might be among them. Calling his name with growing urgency, I scanned each dog with care. But Mar wasn't there. It felt impossible—Mar had never resorted to scavenging waste; after all, he had a good owner, a good friend, who fed him, at least as of last night.

Further down the street, my eyes caught sight of a familiar figure—a woman with a sack and stick, perhaps the same one I'd seen wandering the garbage piles with her children before. Approaching her, I asked if she'd seen any dogs nearby. Her smile, though polite, held confusion as she glanced at the other dogs, clearly unsure of which one I meant. I tried describing Mar—a black dog, not very large—but my words seemed futile. She resumed her task, using her stick to sift through the trash, uninterested in my worry.

Disheartened, I left her to her work and continued my search briefly, calling Mar's name into the empty street. Exhausted and anxious, I eventually returned home, closing the still-open door behind me. The silence inside only heightened the frustration and unease. Mar was gone, and the morning had begun with questions heavier than answers.

I entered home filled with frustration and anxiety and called out Mar's name again. I looked around, but

nothing had changed. “Is Mar lost?” I wondered, refusing to believe it. “And that girl?” I paused for a moment, considering the possibilities. “Is he following her? Or did the girl somehow steal him without his consent?” How had all this happened so suddenly, in the early hours of the morning?

I remembered the biscuits I had left on the table, noticing that the remaining plastic pack was no longer there. The girl must have taken it. Perhaps she had used the biscuits as a trick to lure Mar into following her. Covering my face in despair and anger, I felt my breathing grow more intense. Little by little, step by step, I became aware that I had responsibilities at the theater and decided to focus on those for now, leaving the matter for later. But deep down, I made a promise to myself: I would get Mar back, no matter what it took.

I resolved that after training at the stage, I would dedicate my time and energy to finding him and, if possible, locating the mysterious girl who, with growing suspicion, seemed responsible for all this chaos that left me feeling angry and betrayed. My eyes fell on the history book sitting on the table. I picked up the note and placed it carefully among its pages, hoping that it might hold some value in the future—perhaps as a clue in identifying the girl or finding Mar, my one and only companion, who had been too easily deceived by a stranger with a simple biscuit.

Mar had been hungry, and all it had taken was something to eat—a small, easily exploited vulnerability. And the girl? She fit the profile of someone worthy of suspicion: drunk at night, possibly homeless, and out of place.

Then, I headed to the theater that day, filled with worry and various feelings I struggled to describe—anger, suspicion, and anxiety being the strongest. I went to the stage for training, but I guess everyone could easily notice how bad my day was. I rarely smiled as I usually did, spent too much time lost in thought while sitting, gazed blankly at the ceiling, and struggled to focus on the script. Performing my tasks—expressing my moves, being eloquent, being expressive, or authentically living the emotions—became incredibly difficult. I even found it hard to talk to my friends, especially Antônio. I was certain they all noticed it. Fortunately, *tiu* Rangel was absent that day, which spared me from being shouted at for my lack of performance.

I wished desperately for time to move faster so I could go home, search for Mar, and return to my usual routine. My mind was overwhelmed with countless questions that echoed loudly and made me feel deeply anxious. Some of these questions offered a glimmer of hope: “What if he’s still in the neighborhood? What if he was stolen but finds his way back home by evening, waiting for me at the door as usual? What if the girl is a

good person, and Mar just went to her home but returns later? What if he's simply wandering somewhere nearby and comes back on his own? What if he just didn't hear my voice well this morning?"

These "what-ifs" gave me some comfort, recharged my energy, and revived my spirit, allowing me to moderate my focus and practice at least somewhat well. As the evening approached, I finally left for home. Before I could leave, Antônio, who had been observing me all day, came over and asked if everything was alright. I didn't want to lie completely, but I think I fibbed a little by saying I was in a bad mood due to the rain last night, which made me tired and slightly feverish. He smiled, gave me a playful push, and insisted I go for some coffee to feel better. "Coffee is medicine," he joked. "Really?" I responded, adding humor, and we laughed to end the conversation. Then I rushed off to search for Mar immediately.

I took the bus, and as soon as I arrived at the bus station, I scanned my surroundings vigilantly, not bothering with anything else. My eyes darted down and around, hoping to find Mar waiting there, lost and looking for me—but there was nothing. I walked through the streets with the same tense focus, and as I passed auntie Helena's tent, I stopped to greet her. She had already prepared two *nasi bungkus*, even before I ordered. I smiled, she smiled back, and I tipped her.

As I walked home, I wondered if auntie Helena could sense my worry and anxiety. I wasn't sure, but I guessed she could. She always seemed to know when something was hidden in my eyes—the eyes of an actor. I've always believed that eyes don't lie, as I'd heard from others, perhaps even in an anime. Even actors, who can lie through their expressions and actions, cannot deceive with their eyes. The truth lingers there, even when smiles are fake and words don't align with the heart.

I think old men have learned this truth from experience. They often fix their gaze on your eyes while speaking, scanning everything, and sometimes they smile knowingly at truths you wish weren't so apparent. Auntie Helena, in her way, did the same. Every time I passed by and bought the usual order from her, she could see what I was trying to hide—my worries, my anxieties.

That day, the moment was no different. She prepared my order with a quiet smile, placing the *nasi bungkus* in plastic even before I spoke a word. I, silenced by my own thoughts, thanked her and walked back home.

From afar, I saw my small house, still with the lights off. I walked with my head down, filled with despair, carrying two *nasi bungkus* in one plastic bag. Then, a bark came from the darkness—it seemed to come from that dark house with the lights off. I slowed my pace and focused my sight on the house. Another bark followed,



and I became certain it was a sound familiar to my ears. “Is it from Mar?” I sighed, and at the third bark, I ran instantly, full gallop, toward the house. There he was, sitting in front of the door, waiting for me as he always did.

I immediately hugged him tightly as his tail wagged excitedly. I called his name over and over while hugging him, kissed his head, and stroked it gently. I asked him where he had been all day and what had happened to him. Was he okay? I scanned his body and, to my relief, found him sound and unharmed. I turned on the lights, and we entered the house together, his tail still wagging with joy. I closed the door and locked it, feeling an immense sense of relief. It was as if a lifelong burden had been lifted from my shoulders.

I turned on the TV and had dinner with him as usual. He was surprisingly clean, just as I had guessed. Perhaps she had been the one to bathe him. For now, I didn’t dwell on how everything had unfolded or how he had vanished since the early morning. The most important thing was that he was back by my side, and my life could return to normal.

We watched anime again, with me occasionally checking notifications on my phone. Afterward, I showered and returned to training in front of the big mirror. Naked? Yes, it was fine now, as no one was around.

I trained for the next show. I felt a little disappointed that I hadn't been able to memorize or immerse myself in the scripts all day due to my preoccupation. I committed myself to recovering that lost time tonight and presenting my best version as an actor the next morning.

Luckily, I had brought the script home, and now I could review it again and train my 'new' feelings and expressions. I was confident that the next day, everyone would be astonished by how much I had improved overnight. It might sound almost impossible, but I had a secret weapon: the big mirror and my naked self.

A few hours passed, and I started to feel the need to sleep right away. I put my clothes on and said goodbye to Mar by petting him before he went to his pillow—not the couch. While taming him, I noticed something unusual about him—the smell. I touched his fur, sniffed my hand, and discovered it had a different scent. The smell instantly reminded me of something from the previous night: the girl. She had the same fragrance.

"Her perfume?" I asked myself. "Did she spray her perfume on his head? Is it a clue?" I pondered for a while and realized it was indeed her perfume—a mild fragrance resembling the roses often found in the park. Mar went to rest, and I followed suit, but I kept smelling my hand repeatedly, recalling the mysterious girl I had encountered. We hadn't exchanged a single word before she silently left the house.

She wasn't just any stranger—she had cleaned and arranged my room, left a note of thanks with my name incorrectly written, sticking it to the big mirror. A girl I initially suspected might have been the reason Mar vanished, but ultimately, no—he came back, clean and unharmed. Yet her actions became more mysterious, leaving a trace, or perhaps a clue, in Mar's scent: her rose-like perfume.

“Who is she? Where does she live? Where did she go? Why did she leave silently? Where did she find the name Mar written? Is she interested in history, and my book?” These questions swirled in my mind, questions I suspected only Mar might hold the answers to—answers I desperately needed to uncover soon. Another burning question joined them: “What really happened that night?”

I hit the pillow as soon as I closed my eyes, but behind my eyelids lingered thoughts of secrets that the next day would quietly reveal. The following morning, the alarm went off and on, and I began another day with my usual smile in the bathroom. I felt excited, knowing I had a lot of surprises to showcase at the theater that day. I had prepared thoroughly the night before in front of the big mirror.

I imagined that if *tiu* Rangel came to the *kantor* that day, I would be one of the reasons for his happiness, further enhancing my reputation as a skilled actor. I was

confident that I had improved significantly, seemingly out of nowhere, proving *tiu* Tino's decision to introduce me to the theater was right. My colleagues would also be surprised at the sudden shift—from someone who lacked the spirit of the show the day before to someone who now shone brightly.

I was sure some would speculate that I performed my best only in front of the boss. Others might revisit conspiracies Antônio once shared—that some believed my hometown was where actors first appeared on earth, and my talent was merely a blessing from the Almighty. Yet, no one knew about my secret weapon—the big mirror given to me by *tiu* Tino, which had remained sharp and essential for over ten years. Not even Antônio knew about it.

For some reason, I found it hard to trust anyone completely. Despite being friendly and open, I always kept certain things to myself. Perhaps this habit came from past experiences of mistrust and betrayal, lessons I couldn't forget. Even during the days when Maria was by my side, she knew nothing about the mirror. I always lied, letting her believe the conspiracies shared by my colleagues—that I had been destined for this since childhood.

Maria, being a city girl unfamiliar with *lulik* customs and conspiracies, easily believed such tales. She was

strangely curious about these things, which often led to her being fooled—not only by me but possibly by others before me. Stories about *sakoko*—a flying snake-like creature—or a bird that could speak and predict the future, were common myths. These absurd tales, despite being nonsensical, were often believed by city dwellers to be true occurrences in remote hometowns, where most people were illiterate.

That day, I came back earlier. The boss didn't show up again, which saddened me since I had prepared so much, but it also gave me the advantage of making an excuse to go home early. Luckily, they were happy with my significant improvement, so they easily granted me permission when I told them I still needed some time to recover from an illness. In truth, I wasn't sick and had no symptoms at all. I had simply prepared the excuse of "tiredness," knowing it's something no one can definitively test as true or false. Plus, tiredness can always serve as a potential symptom of an illness that might emerge.

It worked well, though no one even asked for further details. I kept the excuse tucked away for the future, thinking it might come in handy another day. Who knows? There might be a time when the only explanation I can give is, "I'm tired." You never know.

I went back earlier after lunch at the *kantor* because I wanted to explore the neighborhood and streets, hoping

to gather clues about Mar, who had recently become more suspicious. I took the bus and stood the entire journey to allow others to sit. I didn't pay much attention to the bus station; my focus was entirely on the houses that might belong to the mysterious girl or the streets where she might live.

I wandered through the neighborhood, shrouded in mystery and vigilance, searching for clues. Occasionally, I would sit at a distance, scanning every corner and house, watching people as they went in and out. After a few hours, I entertained the comforting thought of heading home after picking up some *nasi bungkus* from auntie Helena. Just as that thought settled, I heard something that felt like a clue—a bark. I knew Mar's bark unmistakably. I focused on the sound, trying to determine its source, which seemed to come from the maze of nearby houses.

I turned around and scanned the surroundings, waiting for another bark. When it came again, I locked in on the source—it seemed to be coming from a blue house with an old, colorless door. “Is he really inside?” I wondered, now entirely fixated on the house. I sat at a distance, observing carefully.

Then, Mar ran out of the house, his tail wagging and his tongue stretched out happily. Someone had opened the door for him, gently stroking his head before he darted out. I couldn't make out the person's face, only catching a

glimpse of a long garment. Without hesitation, I rushed toward the house Mar had emerged from, scanning the area around it. The front yard was overgrown with grass, adding to the mystery of the place.

Summoning courage, I approached the old door and knocked softly, a slow rhythm of three beats. There was no response. I tried again, this time knocking with more force. I glanced back and around, noticing the streets were eerily empty—no one seemed to be around. The silence of the surroundings only deepened the tension in the air.

“Yes,” a voice finally came from the house—a female voice. I stepped back a few paces from the door and listened attentively to the approaching footsteps. The door unlocked and opened. It was her! I immediately recognized her by the mild fragrance of roses—her perfume. It was the same scent I had encountered two nights ago, in the confusion of helping a girl who seemed to be dying. The same perfume had lingered on Mar’s fur that night when I touched and tamed him. I didn’t think the perfume still lingered on my hands—it must have faded away.

She opened the door and looked directly into my eyes while fixing her hair. “Yes?” she said, sounding indifferent. “Is there anything I can help with?” she followed up, asking two questions, yet I remained frozen,

staring at her in confusion. She didn't seem to recognize me, even though I was certain I recognized her. This was undeniably the girl I had met two nights ago—the one who slept on the couch, wore or perhaps stole my favorite Argentina jersey, and whose perfume I could never forget.

Breaking the awkwardness, I managed to say, “Yes,” though my voice trembled as I shifted my gaze to the side. “My dog. My dog is missing. I’ve been trying to find him. Have you seen him around?” She asked calmly how he looked, and I described Mar to her in perfect detail, hoping she might have some clue about me, the dog, or the incident.

“No,” she exclaimed almost instantly. “I haven’t seen any dog like that around.” She smiled and began to close the door. Just then, Mar suddenly ran up, colliding with me from behind, and started playing around between us. Unconsciously, I exclaimed, “Mar?” Upon hearing his name, her eyes widened in shock. She quickly shut the door.



## PART III

In that moment, she had realized everything—who I was and the connection. Perhaps it was even amusing to realize that Mar was not my name, but the name of the tail-wagging dog. Mar was overjoyed, playing with me, and I hugged him tightly, kissing his head as I always did when I returned home. Maybe he had caught my scent or noticed my absence, which led him to find me there.

I briefly considered calling her back outside to talk about everything that had happened over the past few days—between us and Mar. But the moment lingered quietly, leaving me to wonder.

But then, Mar started to nudge the *nasi bungkus* inside the plastic, signaling that it was time to leave and head home. It was fine, though—I had already identified her house, a blue house with messy, overgrown grass in the front yard. And, as it turned out, we didn't live far from each other. Now that I had gathered some valuable information, uncovering the mystery felt like a much easier task.

I walked back with a smile on my face, pleased to know that she was a girl from this very town. Perhaps she lived alone in her own house nearby, and it seemed that Mar and she had formed a special bond since that night. I also recalled her perfume, a mild rose fragrance, which had become a defining feature of her presence.

Her face was becoming clearer in my mind now. She had a round face, light brown skin, and a slight dimple

that appeared when she gave a faint smile. Her eyes were black, matching the color of her hair. She wasn't very tall—shorter than me—and I thought I had noticed a necklace hanging beneath her clothes. The details were etched in my memory, each one adding another layer to the growing mystery.

I went home with Mar at a slow pace, glancing back repeatedly to see if she would open the door, but nothing happened. Yet, I felt certain she was inside the house, watching us—though I couldn't see her. Then, something shifted within me, bringing a strange sense of happiness in the midst of it all.

We reached home, and after a long time, I opened the drawer to retrieve my pencil and a piece of paper from among the countless ones already scribed. I placed them on the table and began writing, driven by a surge of passion and fire. My words painted images of the beautiful ocean and green grasses of the Sunday park. I held the pencil, which had dulled with use, and sharpened it carefully with a knife. Once sharp again, I resumed writing—poems of the old days and an unknown future. It felt as though the pencil struggled to obey the commands of my hand and heart, hesitating under the weight of my emotions.

I wrote poems I had set aside since Maria left me, drawing from a fragrance that rekindled my spirit—

an essence tied to recent memories. Perhaps it was the ocean's vast gaze, pouring through me like a tidal wave and urging me to awaken and write again. Or maybe it was the hesitant footsteps that bore witness to whispers of an innocent heart. And somewhere, amid it all, there was something Mar seemed to notice in me—a quiet connection that fueled the flow of poetry from deep within.

In the next morning, as the alarm went off and the sun rose, I had already prepared a paper on my table—something meant for someone who, in my heart, owned that day and the night before. It was for her, the one with the heavenly beautiful face and the quiet aura of mystery that lingered in silenced distance.

I stepped out of my home with a smile—a smile that Mar had witnessed before, in moments when the nights were tranquil and the roads felt perfect for two souls to walk side by side. A smile from times when the rain held no sway over their steps, and the wind and dust seemed powerless—doing nothing but watching as two worlds converged into one.

I went with the paper and Mar by my side to the blue house with its closed, old door, nestled on an empty street among houses with their lights off. Thankfully, Mar stayed quiet as we walked. Once we reached the front of the door, I carefully placed the paper down, anchoring

it with a small rock while Mar sat nearby, his tongue out and tail wagging joyfully.

Earlier, I had considered leaving two papers—the poem I wrote the night before—but, overcome by doubt, I decided against it. Instead, I left the poem in the drawer alongside others I had written for Maria some time ago. The only paper I placed was scribed simply with, “Hi there, I am João. I want to know you.” I chuckled slightly at the idea of such a small sentence sitting on a large sheet of paper—it didn’t quite fit. Perhaps it would’ve been better suited to a smaller paper, but I decided to let it be.

With the paper delivered, I headed to the *kantor*, the theater, feeling hopeful that she might read the note when she stepped out. Excitement bubbled within me for the training ahead, as the weekend show was set to be a significant event. The boss had mentioned it would be a grand affair with notable attendees, making the training particularly challenging and rigorous.

Despite the intensity, I felt confident and secure—I had trained well and the boss was pleased with my performance. It was shaping up to be an important day, one filled with both artistic preparation and lingering curiosity about the mysterious girl.

In the evening, as I returned home, the rain poured down once again, adding to my anxiety to get back quickly. I had to rush home without stopping to pick up

*nasi bungkus* for the night—just biscuits would suffice. As soon as I arrived, I found Mar waiting for me in front of the house, his tail wagging and my clothes damp from the rain.

I realized that one of my plans had to be canceled—I couldn't go to her house to see if she had read my letter or if she was waiting for me outside. Still, I hoped the rain might serve as an excuse for my absence. Instead, I spent the evening watching TV and writing another letter before going to bed. I placed it inside the drawer alongside the others, then spent some time taming Mar by stroking his head. This time, however, there was no lingering perfume scent—the mild fragrance of roses had faded away.

I slept peacefully that night, but thoughts lingered about what the next step should be. Was this another theater for me to prepare for—a chance to rehearse how I might approach her? Should I train myself in front of the big mirror? No, I decided against it. This wasn't a performance or a show; it didn't require any acting. I simply needed to be myself.

In truth, there was nothing to rehearse because everything I needed was already within me. I resolved to let my authenticity shine and allow the many versions of myself—the real me—to flow out naturally.

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I went out in the morning with a sudden thought to pass by her house, hoping something aligned with my expectations would happen. But, in the early hours, when the streets were still dark and the neighbors' homes silent with their lights off? Why not? Anything could happen. So, I set off with Mar, just like the previous day, but this time without a letter—only hope in my eyes and fire in my heart.

From afar, I noticed that everything remained the same. Nothing had changed. Saddened but composed, I continued walking, scanning every window, hoping to catch a glimpse of her waiting inside. Yet, there was nothing—no sign of her. I passed by with Mar by my side.

Just as I was about to move on, I noticed a white piece of paper on the ground, lying in front of the door. I paused, retracing a few steps to check it out. Lowering myself, I saw it was a piece of paper the size of those I had used, with a small rock weighing it down. My heart sank as I realized it was the paper I had left the previous day. Now, it was wet and damaged from the rain the night before, almost entirely useless. I picked it up, folded it, and slid it into my pocket, tossing the small rock onto the street in frustration.

Mar observed everything as I quickly walked away, not once looking back at him, the blue house, the dream, or the hope of ever passing by that place again. I went

to my training, resuming my usual demeanor as though nothing from the past few days had affected me. I forced myself to return to normal, to find peace within myself and with Mar. The lingering scent of that perfume, the mysterious girl who had left me in a mix of confusion and surprise, and everything strange and unfamiliar—I willed it all to vanish, banishing it from my thoughts with determination.

That evening, I joined António at his coffee shop, holding a cup as we recounted stories of old times and discussed the upcoming great show just two days away. Later, I took the bus home, noticing the familiar faces of passengers I saw almost daily yet had never spoken to. It was odd—how people who sat side by side every day never exchanged names or got to know one another. Sometimes there were fake smiles, and other times not even a greeting, likely due to the burdens of work or family life. I didn't know why things were this way, but it seemed to be the nature of grown-ups, carrying responsibilities, big or small.

Then, I headed home to greet auntie Helena and pick up the same two same menu in the same plastic bag as every night. Everything happened as usual—Mar waited for me with his tail wagging, ready for hugs and kisses; I took a bath; watched anime on TV; checked my notifications; and practiced my training before going to bed. After training and working on some improvements,



I patted Mar on the head and prepared to hit the pillow.

Just as I lay down, I noticed something strange in my pocket. “Oh, it’s the letter I left this morning,” I realized. I pulled it out to see that it had dried, though it was still crumpled and messy. Suddenly, I felt an urge to open it and read the words I had written before tossing it into the garbage can. But what I read felt as though the world had turned upside down.

The letter now contained the words: “Thank you. I also hope so.” A short sentence? A new one? Was it a new letter I had unconsciously placed in my pocket? How had it gotten there? How had this all happened? Overwhelmed by confusion and suppressed happiness, I flipped the paper over and saw my own writing on the other side. She had responded on the back of the letter I left, and I hadn’t realized it, blinded by my sadness, frustration, and other swirling emotions.

My eyes lit up as I carefully unfolded the letter, smoothing it out to restore it as best as I could. I placed it on the table and sighed, unsure of what to do next. I lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling, lost in waves of fantasy and a lifted spirit. My mind wandered, imagining the moment she found the letter—her smile and dimple, her hair falling softly around her face, the surprise in her expression. Perhaps she had looked around to see if the writer was still nearby. Maybe she read it indoors or just outside, pondering the person behind the words. Perhaps

Mar, in some unexplainable way, had revealed something to her about me.

In the end, she knew it was me—the man whose house she stayed in for one night, whose shorts and Argentina jersey she borrowed and hadn't returned. Perhaps I was a mysterious figure to her, just as she was to me.

I eventually sat up, took the letter, and placed it in the drawer. Out of nowhere, I became aware of how content I felt living a simple, normal life—eating dinner with Mar at night, going out for training, and making my boss happy in the mornings. That was enough. “No more drama this time,” I thought to myself, closing my eyes and letting everything else fade away.

I really loved my ordinary life—the simplicity and normalcy of living without too many new things to disrupt the rhythm I had grown accustomed to. Avoiding the things that kept me awake at night or invaded my focus on training was essential. Those disturbances only brought trouble and chaos into a life I had carefully navigated through many days and nights. Fantasies, while enjoyable at times, could also become overwhelming, turning people into slaves to their own dreams and wasting parts of life without knowing how to rebuild them. So, I chose peace.

That decision marked the moment I began living anew by letting go of the mess and noise that surrounded

me. Papa once advised me about the challenges I might face as I grew older, becoming a man. But now, I see things differently. Most problems arise not from the world around us but from within—problems we create ourselves, becoming trapped in our search for solutions, too proud to ask for help.

From my experience of living in the city for more than ten years, I learned that it was never my comfort zone. The initial challenges of standing firm and walking tall as a man were daunting. But time, along with the steady light of the sun, taught me resilience and reminded me of the power within to break the chains that weighed me down. Whether self-made or imposed by society, those chains were there to be broken, allowing me to walk freely and live fully.

Today was the final day before the grand show, and as expected, the training was more serious than ever. The boss was particularly sensitive to errors made by the actors, but I loved that intensity. On days like this, everyone strives to become their best selves, ensuring they're good enough for the performance. The boss's strict and observant nature added to the focus, making us take each detail seriously. It reminded me how valuable it is to pay close attention to the little things in life. By becoming more acute in observing even the smallest aspects, we can more easily improve ourselves—identifying the parts that need change or refinement.

But life isn't just about fixing flaws; it's also about appreciating the good around us, especially the smaller joys that often go unnoticed. I've realized that people, including myself, tend to only celebrate big achievements while overlooking the small victories that also deserve recognition. Little triumphs are equally worthy of applause, yet they're often dismissed in favor of grand accomplishments.

It saddens me that many people continuously strive to emulate others, dreaming of lives they don't have while ignoring the blessings and achievements they already possess. It's truly insulting to think of how fortunate we are compared to others in need. That's why I take joy in small acts of kindness—like tipping beggars at the bus station or giving up my seat to those who are lame. Why are people so selfish and reluctant to be grateful for what they have? Perhaps it's because we are never truly satisfied with ourselves. Or perhaps we become so desperate over our own problems that we yearn for someone else's life, unaware that they, too, face struggles hidden from view.

In truth, we are all actors, wearing masks and constantly switching roles. We struggle to differentiate between the masks we wear and our real faces. Only when we are alone, free from phones and worries, do we encounter our truest selves. Beyond the wounds and burdens, there lies a wealth of blessings we fail to recognize and appreciate. Every actor has many masks,

but the challenge lies in distinguishing them from the face beneath—the one that reveals our essence.

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Returning home after the last day of training, I was a little tired and running a bit late. Luckily, auntie Helena hadn't gone home yet—perhaps she knew a man like me would always pass by to pick up the usual menu in one plastic bag. I greeted her with a smile, collected my order, and continued on my way.

Just as I reached home, something compelled me to take a different route—one that led to the blue house. Her house. She, who I had tried so hard to forget but still couldn't help glancing toward. This time, the scene felt more unsettling. As I passed by, the lights were off, casting the house in an eerie shadow, its mystery deepened by the darkness. It struck me as odd that, while other houses in the neighborhood still had their lights on, this blue house was already in complete darkness.

I tried to calm my mind, refusing to let negative thoughts consume me. I reassured myself, thinking, “Perhaps she—or whoever is inside—simply has a different schedule for turning off the lights.” Still, I walked away, my eyes constantly flickering back to the house, my mind racing with endless, uncontrollable questions.

When I reached home, everything was as usual. Yet, I couldn't shake the feeling that someone in the

neighborhood had noticed me taking this alternate route repeatedly over the past few days. A few days ago, I'd observed an old, overweight man who lived at the corner of this new route. He always sat alone on his balcony at night, lighting cigarettes. Every time I walked past him, I greeted him out of politeness, but he remained silent. His silence felt unsettling, almost scary.

Perhaps he was just the type who wasn't accustomed to change—a new person walking past his house might have seemed unusual to him. Thankfully, I didn't make much eye contact with him and tried to appear as natural as possible, as if I were busy and preoccupied. Yet, he might have been wondering about me, the “new guy” on his route, just as I wondered about him.

Though slightly unnerved, I let it go and continued on my way. There wasn't much to dwell on about the old man smoking his cigarette and ignoring my greetings. At times, I felt tempted not to greet him anymore—not out of rudeness, but as a sign of frustration toward people with such attitudes, which I often deemed “not human” at all. How could an old man act that way? He should have been happy to receive respect from someone like me, especially in a world where so many older people are forgotten, abandoned, and left behind.

But in the end, I chose to stay true to myself. I continued to be good and act kindly, regardless of

anyone else's behavior. My actions weren't dependent on the responses of others.

Arriving home, I found my best companion of over ten years waiting for me in hunger. Greeting him felt far more genuine and heartfelt than interactions with some people—like the old man who sits on the balcony every night with a cigarette. For more than a decade, Mar had kept the same attitude, always welcoming my greetings with unmatched affection—a quality far more loving than many who can think and reason.

As I kissed and patted him, I noticed the familiar scent of perfume on his head again. This time, however, I trained myself not to be overly surprised by ordinary things, especially by something as trivial as this. It might have come from the girl, perhaps poured on him without much thought—not as a message or symbol. Maybe my tendency to overthink stems from watching too much anime. I often find myself suspicious of things that don't warrant concern. Anime creators intentionally weave suspicion into scenes, likely to keep viewers curious and hooked on the next episodes. This clever tactic has made anime addictive for many, drawing them in every night, unable to skip even a single scene, let alone an episode.

For some people, missing scenes feels like losing a part of their lives, prompting them to re-watch episodes with urgency. Anime creators are truly brilliant, crafting

stories that feel almost impossible not to watch—for kids and adults alike. In some cases, a boy's love for anime continues well into adulthood, despite growing responsibilities. He watches them at night just as he did as a child, skipping homework for anime back then and skipping other burdens now—whether it's work as a doctor, teacher, or actor.

But that hasn't been my experience. I didn't watch anime as a child—I was more of a history book lover. I only discovered anime when I moved to the city and rented a house with *tiu* Tino. Even then, I didn't watch much while he was with me. It was only after he decided to return to his hometown that I made TV a part of my nightly routine before training and bedtime.

While I enjoy anime, I wouldn't say I'm addicted. I feel fine skipping scenes once or twice, and during particularly tiring weeks, I don't mind skipping entire episodes. Even when the anime is playing, I often find myself distracted by notifications on my phone, paying little attention to the show. Anime is just a small part of my life—it's not my whole world. My life is defined by what I create on stage for thousands of people and what I see reflected in the big mirror. That's it—nothing more, nothing less.

Then, I prepared myself thoroughly for the next day—the great show in the city that my boss worried



so much about. I felt confident and ready, fully assured that I had put in the necessary effort. The following day, I woke up early and easily, filled with enthusiasm for the highly anticipated show of the weekend—an event that only happens once a month.

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Every month, we have just one great show, which tiu Rangel regards as being “far more important than the smaller ones.” However, I hold a different perspective: \*every show is important; no performance is less significant than the others.\* I believe it’s crucial not to underestimate the audience. Whether there are fifty people or a thousand, they are all worthy of my best performance. This, I think, is one of my secrets to being consistently good on stage.

I’ve always believed that being an actor is not dependent on the size of the audience or the grandeur of the venue. No matter the circumstances, I strive to bring out the best in me as an actor. It’s not just a show; it’s a reflection of the passion and dedication that I pour into every performance.

In the morning, I stepped out with more energy than ever before. For a fleeting moment, I considered bringing Mar along, feeling that after more than ten years, he might enjoy experiencing something new—especially a great show like this one. Perhaps it was my excitement

and confidence in being well-prepared that sparked this sudden thought. I paused for a while, looking at the streets and then at Mar, who sat with his eyes wide open and tail wagging eagerly. It seemed as though he knew what I was thinking, and the idea of coming along thrilled him.

The thought filled me with joy as I imagined how happy he would be if it really happened. But then, doubts crept in—questions that began to bother me. “Who would take care of him while I’m performing? Could I count on a kind audience member to watch over him?” It felt unlikely. My mind, naturally inclined to explore the worst-case scenarios, began to picture potential disasters. What if he barked at the audience? What if he bit some mischievous kids who provoked him? Such chaos would ruin the entire show, and without a doubt, tui Rangel’s fury would follow, potentially costing me my job.

So, despite Mar’s hopeful eyes, I patted his head gently and decided to leave him behind as usual. It was a difficult choice, but sometimes it had to be this way. Picking up my pace, I headed toward the theater with renewed determination.

The great show for the day was a dramatic tale of a kingdom under siege by a malevolent wizard. The wizard sought to destroy the town, wielding a magic wand to transform the townspeople into animals. To everyone’s

surprise, the story was a tragedy, culminating in the King's death and his transformation into an animal—a poignant end to a gripping performance.

It was all carefully plotted to astonish the audience and leave them impressed by the unpredictability of the scenes, ensuring that the *Halakan* theater left a lasting impression. The goal was to make the theater stand out as unique—different from other theaters that recycle the same plots repeatedly, leading to boredom. Being different created a powerful appeal, drawing audiences to attend regularly, both on weekends and for the monthly great shows.

Every detail was designed to captivate the viewers, culminating in the tragic climax where the king dies in front of all the transformed people. To reverse their transformation and restore them to human form, the wizard had to be accepted by the crowd as the new king. The narrator set the stage before the performance began, explaining the backstory: two brothers who fought for the throne after the death of their father, King Boaventura. The younger brother, Filipe, desired the throne, despite tradition dictating that the elder brother, Marco (played by António), was the rightful heir.

Filipe secretly gathered soldiers to plot an attack on his brother. However, their plans were discovered before they could be executed, and Filipe and his men were exiled

from the kingdom. Years later, Filipe sought revenge and trained to become a wizard in the dark mountain of Savara near the kingdom. Rumors of his return, now wielding greater power and a magic wand, spread terror among the people. The kingdom was invaded one night when the soldiers were unprepared. The wizard transformed all the townsfolk into various animals (portrayed in the show with tinted skin and animalistic movements), and even the soldiers succumbed to his magic as resistance was crushed.

Marco then infiltrated the king's palace, effortlessly removing the guards at the gate. Long before his return, he had envisioned his triumph. With his newfound powers and magic wand, he believed he could control anyone and achieve anything he desired. With a triumphant smile, he finally confronted King Filipe's loyal guard—me. The tension built, promising a dramatic showdown that would further distinguish the *Halakan* theater's gripping narrative.

I could see that the audience was utterly terrified as they witnessed the final scene. They must have been questioning how the story would end. Surely, none of them had expected such an outcome. "What? The king died? That can't be! Someone, a hero, must save the king!" they likely thought. Their expectations clung to hope, and they must have believed I, as the last person left in the kingdom to defend King Filipe, would defeat the wizard

and restore order. But despite my efforts, I ultimately lost my sword, became powerless, and was transformed into a dog—symbolizing the most loyal servant of the lord.

The audience's collective gasp and shocked cries echoed loudly as they witnessed the fall of their final hope—my character's demise. Yet in my heart, I felt deeply fulfilled. The tension this moment created in the room was precisely what the final dialogue between King Filipe and the wizard Marco was meant to evoke. It was meticulously crafted to move the audience to tears, exactly as the boss had envisioned. In my mind, I could imagine *tiu* Rangel backstage, beaming with pride that everything had played out flawlessly, proving the performance to be a masterpiece worthy of applause.

Just moments remained before the curtain would close, leaving the audience caught between two worlds—one of tears and heartbreak, and another of awe and fulfillment. The tragedy was coming to its climax, where the two brothers no longer listened to each other, their bond shattered by ambition. In the end, everything was about the throne, meant for only one of them, though time itself had failed to determine who was worthy. Now, all that remained was the wand in Marco's hand and a defeated, miserable king with nothing—no followers, no allies, and nothing left to fight for. King Filipe, stripped of all power, calmly expressed that the throne meant little compared to their brotherhood.

But to Marco, nothing else mattered. He had endured years of misery outside the kingdom walls, and now, everything seemed to fall perfectly into place. This was the moment he had awaited through countless days and nights of suffering. Circling Filipe, Marco taunted him, mocking his unworthiness as a king. To him, traditions and customs were meaningless—only power and merit held any value.

Finally, unable to endure Filipe's words of reconciliation any longer, Marco decided it was time to act. The story reached its powerful crescendo, leaving the audience deeply moved by the brothers' tragic end, and cementing the performance as an unforgettable piece of art.

First, the wizard threw away the magic wand, shocking the audience and making it impossible for them to predict his next move. "How could he throw the wand away?" they must have wondered. "Is he reconsidering his actions? Has he realized how evil he's become? Or perhaps he was moved by the king's heartfelt words about the value of family and the bond of blood?" The scene created a whirlwind of speculation and suspense, leaving everyone guessing.

But then, the next action unfolded—equally unexpected. The wizard picked up my sword, which had fallen from my hands, and pointed it at his older

brother, the king. Gasps filled the room, and whispers grew louder within the theater walls as astonished audience members speculated further. For me and the other actors, this was the moment where everything meticulously planned began to fall into place, creating an unforgettable experience.

The two brothers locked eyes, exchanging silent gazes filled with tension and complexity. Between them lay my sword, a symbol linking their two worlds: one driven by the pursuit of the throne and honor, and the other fueled by revenge and raw power. Then, the wizard prepared for his final act. He slowly raised the sword, intending to behead the king in front of the kingdom's transformed people.

The true extent of the younger brother's return became clear—far worse than anyone had anticipated. He wasn't merely seeking to turn the king into another creature. He wanted to kill him outright. As the sword rose high, ready to strike down on the king's neck with tremendous force, a dog suddenly barked loudly from the middle of the crowd. The barking was so strong and abrupt that it seized the wizard's attention, forcing him to pause his action. The dog's bark reverberated through the hall, drawing the focus of not only the wizard but also the other actors.

The audience turned to the source of the barking as the dog ran toward the stage. The crowd instinctively opened a passage for it, their astonishment intensifying

the energy in the room. The noise grew deafening, filling the hall with chaotic murmurs about the barking dog. Held captive by the wizard's men, I too was caught in the moment, wondering what was truly happening. My gaze followed the dog as the entire scene erupted into a mess of noise and movement, elevating the tension to its peak.

I looked to the side of the stage and saw *tiu* Rangel walking behind the curtain, scanning the whole situation. I then turned to Antônio, the king, who was equally confused and uncertain, just like all the other actors. Suddenly, the big dog leaped onto the stage, positioning itself between the king and the wizard. The dog began barking furiously at the wizard, causing the sword in his right hand to drop to the ground without him realizing it. It was as though the dog was defending the king, driving the wizard away.

This unexpected turn left the actors completely bewildered, unsure of what to do next. But for the audience, the excitement returned in full force. They erupted in cheers and shouts, believing the dog's appearance was part of the plot—imagining it was meant to save the king. Antônio, still kneeling as the defeated king, looked directly at me, recognizing the dog immediately. It was Mar.

I, too, was stunned to see Mar in action. But to prevent the show from being ruined and to maintain the



audience's immersion, I signaled to the other actors to remain calm and composed, ensuring they didn't break character. Sensing the looseness of the grip from the men holding me, I took advantage of the moment to slip free from their arms. I rushed to Mar's side and began barking alongside him, fully committing to the scene.

Mar didn't react to my presence—after all, I was his owner. The wizard, however, was overcome with fear and began crawling backward, clearly terrified. Mar's relentless barking, combined with mine, caused the hall to erupt with noise as the audience grew more animated than ever. Their cheers and energy filled the space in a way no one could have anticipated.

I signaled to the actors playing the wizard's men with my eyes, prompting them to feign terror and retreat slowly in fear. Then, noticing the sword within reach, I seized the opportunity. I discreetly slid it to Antônio at the back. With just a single nod, he understood my intention without a word, ready to carry the performance to its climactic conclusion.

So, he picked up the fallen sword I had dropped and stood once more, holding it firmly in his hand. Slowly, he pointed it at the wizard, who was now paralyzed with fear, his blank mind rendering him powerless as he crawled backward. Then, the king ran full gallop toward the vulnerable villain—his own younger brother. Just

as he raised the sword to strike the wizard, he suddenly stopped, standing silently before him. I quickly signaled Mar to cease his barking, and the stage fell into total silence. The audience, previously filled with anticipation, was now breathless, stunned by the king's pause rather than the expected act of killing the wizard.

The king dropped the sword from his grasp, and a wave of murmurs rippled through the audience. Confusion filled the room momentarily before everything went silent again. I could see that the actors were at their best, ensuring no one in the audience noticed anything amiss, sticking faithfully to the plot as if this had all been planned from the beginning. Then, the king did something completely unexpected—he lifted his younger brother from the ground and embraced him, shouting loudly, “Marco, my brother!”

What? Did the king just forgive him? The audience was in utter shock, their surprise reflected in the complete silence that enveloped the hall. The tension melted away as the two brothers hugged each other in the middle of the stage, tears streaming down their faces. I sat quietly beside Mar, observing the profound moment, while the other actors stood still, saying nothing, allowing the weight of the scene to settle.

The sudden shift in the narrative—from revenge to reconciliation—moved the audience deeply, their

emotions transformed into melancholy. I noticed some audience members in the first row pulling out handkerchiefs to wipe away their uncontrollable tears. The wizard, now visibly shaken, picked up the magic wand from the floor. With a gaze of understanding toward the king, he uttered the spell to restore the townspeople to their human forms: “Abrakadabra.”

However, there was one problem—Mar couldn’t be transformed back. The audience didn’t seem to notice this detail amidst the wave of emotion that had engulfed the hall. The misery and beauty of the scene weighed heavily on every heart.

“Welcome back, my brother,” the king said softly, hugging Marco once more. The people of the kingdom erupted in shouts and exultation, their joy filling the air as the curtain began to close. It was a powerful, poignant end to a story that would linger in the minds of all who had witnessed it.

Just as the curtain closed, the audience erupted into loud, thunderous applause that lasted for minutes. They might have never witnessed such an extraordinary show, filled with unexpected twists and turns. What made the performance so remarkable was its ability to keep the audience on edge, unable to predict the next plot twist. Everything unfolded as a surprise, beyond anyone’s expectations. The audience, overcome with emotion,

shouted through their tears, and some even hugged each other in amazement.

The curtain reopened, and all the actors lined up in a row to bow to the audience. The hall was filled with endless exaltations as the audience gave a standing ovation, cheering and applauding enthusiastically. I had Mar beside me, standing proudly as an honorary actor. He barked excitedly, capturing the crowd's attention, and began jumping around playfully with me. The audience was in awe, witnessing perhaps for the first time a dog as part of the cast. Mar, known only to António and me on stage—and possibly to a few neighbors—became the unexpected star of the show.

As the curtain closed again, we made our way to the changing room, overwhelmed with joy. Some of us hugged each other through tears, celebrating what was undoubtedly one of the best performances ever. Then *tiu* Rangel appeared, beaming with pride and shouting congratulations to all the actors.

It was at that moment that my colleagues noticed Mar for the first time. “Is this your dog, João?” *tiu* Rangel asked, and the room fell silent. Nervous and hesitant, I responded, “Yes!” *Tiu* Rangel walked over, hugged me, and patted Mar on the head. “What a great dog!” he exclaimed, and the room burst into cheers once more.

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Though the plot had deviated slightly, it had worked out better than anyone could have hoped, exceeding all expectations. The show deeply moved the audience, touching their hearts and immersing them completely in the story.

As the conversations buzzed around us, *tiu* Rangel turned to me again and, speaking loudly enough for everyone to hear, asked, “Did you spray perfume on your dog’s head?” He sniffed his hand after petting Mar and grinned. Then, he bent down to pet Mar again, exclaiming, “What a perfume!”

I smiled in confusion and admitted, “Yes, it’s a mild rose fragrance.” Tiu Rangel burst into laughter, teasing me, “How come you never wear perfume yourself, but your dog does?” The room filled with laughter, and in that moment, everything—from Mar’s unexpected performance to the shared joy of the evening—felt magical.

And everyone laughed at the joke, and I played along, quietly accepting it while hiding my own confusion about the fresh perfume on Mar’s head. “Did she come to the show?” I wondered. “Was she the one who brought Mar here?” These unanswered questions swirled in my mind. Overwhelmed by curiosity, I ran out without much explanation, heading straight to the stage. There, I stood, scanning the crowd as they exited slowly, searching for

her amidst the sea of people. It was nearly impossible to spot one person among thousands.

For a brief moment, I considered shouting, but quickly dismissed the idea as inappropriate. Then, out of nowhere, Mar suddenly bolted toward the crowd, his tail wagging excitedly. Mar? Could it be? Was he leading me to her? I wasted no time and followed him, though navigating through the chaotic crowd felt like traversing a labyrinth. The people moved in every direction, out of sync and disorderly, making it difficult to keep up. I had to remain patient, queuing and weaving through the throng, my eyes darting around and my ears tuned for any sign of Mar that might guide me.

After what felt like an eternity, I finally made it to the door and slipped outside to the open area beyond the theater. The crowd was still thick, though far less chaotic, making it slightly easier to scan the faces. Desperate for a better vantage point, I climbed onto a bench in the corner and began searching for any sign of her. My gaze shifted through the movements, and then—I saw them.

There was Mar, walking beside someone, a girl whose back was turned to me. Her long black hair flowed, instantly familiar. Though I couldn't see her face, something in my gut told me it was her. The sight of Mar and the girl together brought a rush of emotion, and I stood there, frozen for a moment, as the pieces began to fall into place.

They weren't too far ahead, but the problem was that they were heading toward the bus station, and I needed to move quickly to reach them before the bus arrived. I climbed down from the bench and started running after them, shouting, "Mar, Mar." From a distance, I noticed the bus pulling into the station, and the passengers beginning to board. I guessed they were likely already inside.

Just as I reached the station, gasping for breath, the bus began to move, its seats already full. I shouted for the driver to stop, but after just two calls, my breath gave out from the intensity of running. I waved my hand desperately to signal the driver, but it was no use—the bus continued on its way.

Frustrated and out of options, I realized I'd have to wait for another bus if I wanted to follow them. But then, a different thought crossed my mind: "Or I could just return to the changing room to hear *tiu* Rangel's announcement about the next show and training. That's probably the better choice." After taking a moment to catch my breath and calm down, I decided to head back to the theater.

Just as I was about to turn around, I spotted António walking toward me from afar. It seemed the announcement was already done, and everyone was heading home for the weekend. I quickly wiped the sweat

from my forehead and tried to act as normal as possible to avoid raising any suspicion. Still, I couldn't help feeling awkward—leaving the changing room before the announcement wasn't proper, and I should have stayed with everyone else.

António's expression was one of curiosity and confusion. I could tell he had questions running through his mind, and it was only a matter of time before he voiced them. As he approached, we fell into step, heading toward the bus station together. To deflect his curiosity, I came up with an excuse, saying that some of my friends had attended the show today, and I had gone to accompany them to the bus to thank them for their presence. This seemed to satisfy him, at least for now, as we continued on our way, chatting lightly.

"Then, Mar?" he asked, noticing his absence. I quickly came up with another excuse, saying that Mar had gone with the friend I mentioned earlier. At this point, António seemed a bit more confused, probably wondering how close I was to this so-called friend, especially since I hadn't mentioned them before. Realizing his growing curiosity, I immediately shifted the conversation to a different topic.

I began reminiscing about the show, marveling at how completely it defied everyone's expectations—even the actors had no idea what was coming next. Luckily,



everything stayed under control, and no one in the audience noticed any awkwardness. The entire performance flowed so seamlessly, it felt as though the twists had been intentionally scripted. António and I laughed, recognizing how well we understood each other on stage, even without needing to exchange words. Every actor transformed themselves in the moment, adapting effortlessly to the unscripted events, yet delivering their parts flawlessly.

“Because we are actors, João,” António said with a grin, tapping my shoulder. I nodded in agreement. As actors, we were accustomed to facing the unexpected, and we had trained ourselves to adapt quickly to any changes. Years of practice had made it second nature to switch seamlessly between characters, embodying each role with flexibility and ease. The company we kept for so long also played a crucial role. Having spent years working together, we had developed an intuitive understanding of one another. A simple nod or gesture was often enough to communicate a plan and coordinate our next steps.

I remembered the words of *tiu* Tino when he first trained me: adaptability is the core of being an actor. In those moments on stage, I realized how true his teachings were—how well we had all internalized them to create something truly remarkable.

He told me that through acting repeatedly, I would grow increasingly sensitive to even the smallest signs—a skill I suspected might be influenced by how anime characters behave. He also said that as I practiced more with my colleagues, we would reach a point where we could understand each other without ever uttering a word. At first, I was puzzled and curious about whether I would truly become that perceptive over time. The idea of understanding someone without spoken words seemed implausible. “How could two people possibly communicate without speaking? Surely, nods and gazes aren’t enough to convey a message, let alone substitute for millions of words,” I thought.

But as it turns out, what the elders often say holds more truth than I realized at the time. Back then, I was too young and inexperienced to grasp the depth of their words. I think this happens to many young men like me—we tend to dismiss the wisdom of our elders, deeming it outdated or irrelevant in modern times. We believe there’s no truth in those lessons for the present, but this way of thinking is immature and short-sighted. As we grow older and gain experience, we come to understand that the advice from those before us isn’t as obsolete as we once thought. Instead, those experiences are timeless, offering lessons that remain valuable even in today’s world. Life teaches us in its own time, but as children, we can often be too arrogant to prepare ourselves properly for the futures we’re bound to face.

Unfortunately—or perhaps fortunately—this cycle repeats with each generation. The same youthful skepticism leads to later realizations as life's challenges shape us. Sometimes, as grown-ups, we find ourselves sitting in reflective silence or taking solitary walks late at night, trying to calm the inner storms that become increasingly difficult to manage. The hurricanes of emotion and thought seem relentless, but they are, in their way, part of the human experience. After all, it's through these trials that we become more human—more aware, more introspective—than we might ever have been otherwise.

And now, what shakes me most is the thought of that girl—the one who reappears in my world, despite my efforts to erase her face or forget her smile. Yet, she remains, carrying a presence stronger than ever, leaving behind a scent that pulls my spirit toward the place where she began. Perhaps a garden of roses, or the blue house I used to pass by—a house that held no one but the beauty of a forgotten mystery, the girl my heart once longed for, even as my mind struggled to let her vanish.

So, I set off—from the bus to the station, onto the silent streets that belong to both her and me, venturing into a realm of fantasy where the wind blows softly in the morning light. My feet carried me confidently toward the house—the blue house she lived in. From afar, I noticed it looked the same as before, its front yard overgrown with grass.

I approached and knocked gently three times on the old door. Inside, I heard noises—perhaps footsteps—I couldn't be certain. Then came the sound of keys jangling, and the door opened. She stood there smiling as we greeted each other. Without speaking, she gestured for me to enter, as though she had already expected my visit, as though no explanation was necessary.

Mar rushed to greet me with his wagging tail, his excitement spilling over as I hugged him and kissed his head. The room was warm and lively, the TV on and playing, while an elderly woman sat in front of it in a wheelchair, watching silently. The girl signaled for me to take a seat on the sofa, her gestures clear and unspoken.

She gently pushed the wheelchair around to face me, revealing the old woman's face. Her warm smile greeted me, and as we exchanged pleasantries, I kissed her hand in respect. Then, the girl quietly slipped away, leaving me and the woman alone in the living room—a setting brimming with untold stories and lingering connections.

The elderly woman was the first to break the silence, saying with a warm smile, "My daughter Lena told me you're a friend of hers." Though confusion swirled in my mind, I managed to say, "Yes, we are," and added a polite yet slightly forced smile. Internally, questions raced. Why had the girl, now known as Lena, told her mother we were friends? Why would she fabricate this connection

between us? But instead of dwelling on my thoughts, I chose to keep the conversation flowing, asking the older woman about her condition.

She was instantly animated, diving into every detail of her health. I had encountered people like her before—those who loved talking about themselves and could weave a single question into the answers for countless others. She shared the story of an accident last year when she had fallen down the stairs, leaving her legs in their current state. She spoke about the surgery, recounting the fear and stress she had felt both before and after the procedure, along with her emotions now.

Though some might find such enthusiasm overwhelming, I found myself deeply engaged. I've always loved hearing stories like these, especially from older people. Their narratives, even when over-exuberant, often carry valuable lessons and offer opportunities to provide them with the support they need. Listening to her reminded me of my parents back in the hometown. In the last two or three years, I've noticed how eager they've become to share their experiences and how much they seem to need someone to truly hear them out.

I've never quite understood why, but it seems that older people share this tendency. Often, all they need is for someone to listen to them—to laugh softly at their old jokes and show appreciation for their stories. For them,

recounting memories from the past brings happiness. They cherish those moments as the most precious parts of their lives.

It's easy to see why they take pride in speaking of the past. They love reminiscing about their younger days, their old friends, past loves, cherished possessions, and countless memories: their first cars, scars, teachers, games, books, songs, and even items they've lost over time. Whether it's a pair of boots, a faded photograph, or an old church, these fragments of their lives bring joy as they recall and recount them.

Nostalgia, I believe, is the perfect word to describe it. They miss the old days, and by sharing their memories, they keep those days alive in a way that bridges the past and the present. In these quiet moments, surrounded by the stories of yesterday, we can find the wisdom they offer, tucked away in memories that still linger.

Often, in our youth, we rush forward in pursuit of experiences, achievements, and possessions without pausing to truly consider their significance. We get caught in the momentum—chasing goals, accumulating accolades, or seeking validation—while neglecting the beauty and meaning that surround us.

We forget to savor the simple joys, like the scent of roses by the path or the fruits waiting to be picked along the way. But time humbles us. Eventually, we run

out of energy to keep sprinting forward. We slow down, sometimes to a crawl, and in that stillness, we're forced to confront the things we've collected over time. It's then we realize how much of it holds no true value—gathered not out of need, but out of mere desire.

That reckoning can be painful. Stopping to reflect on our lives takes courage, yet it's often in those moments of reflection that we gain clarity. We see the things we clung to fade into irrelevance, while the things we truly needed—the love and companionship of those who matter most—rise to the forefront. In the end, it's not our trophies, certificates, or accolades that we long for. It's the people who walked beside us, who shared the journey, who made us pause and live in the moment.

The great irony of life is this: we often don't understand how to truly live until it's nearly too late. When we find ourselves confined to a hospital bed, stripped of distractions, with nothing but the hum of a machine keeping time, we finally see what matters. At that moment, life's meaning becomes clear, and our wishes align with a deeper truth: to have loved deeply, to have shared freely, and to have walked with purpose—not just run with ambition.

It's a call to live now, to appreciate the here and now, and to cherish the connections we forge. Life should be lived as if we were already reflecting from that hospital

bed, with only a breath left to spare. We should make every step meaningful, every encounter a treasure, and every moment something to truly hold onto.

His gentle reasoning touched me, as it would anyone who listens with an open heart. He left me with more than money; he gifted you a lesson, showing that the things we often chase, like wealth, are fleeting. What lasts are the eternal treasures—moments like watching kids play with kites, seeing the kind patience of an old man waiting for the rain to stop, or even sitting beside a beloved companion like Mar. These are the things that define a life well-lived.

The eternal things that fill life with meaning often come freely, while the temporary ones demand a price. And yet, how often are we tricked into valuing the costly over the priceless? We equate expense with worth, mistakenly thinking that acquiring the temporary will bring lasting fulfillment. But *tiu* Tino's actions and wisdom show otherwise. He understood early on what so many only realize too late—that gratitude for simple, eternal gifts can transform life, while chasing temporary ones leaves us empty.

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The conversation with the elderly woman continued, warm and unhurried. At some point, Lena entered the room, carrying hot coffee and biscuits on a tray. She



offered them to us with a gentle smile, joining the moment by sitting beside me as if we had been close friends all along. Her presence felt familiar, almost natural, despite the lingering questions in my mind.

As time passed—perhaps an hour or more—I noticed the wind picking up outside, blowing harder against the windows. Lena got up to close them, her movements swift yet careful. The rain followed shortly after, drumming against the house and sealing me within its walls for the time being. It was an oddly compelling place to find myself in—a home shared only by an old mother and her daughter, shrouded in quiet mystery.

The air carried a certain strange energy, the kind that stirs curiosity. I couldn't help but wonder about the hidden stories and layers within this blue house, a place that seemed to whisper untold secrets while sheltering me from the storm outside.

It wasn't too cold inside, but Mar had already made himself comfortable under the old lady's wheelchair, seemingly seeking some extra warmth. What amazed me was how naturally friendly and close Mar seemed to be with these strangers, as though they'd shared each other's company for years and knew one another well.

The old woman continued her steady stream of stories, directed mostly at me. Eventually, the small clock around her wrist chimed, prompting Lena to get

up and fetch some pills for her mother. After handing her the medication, the old lady carried on talking enthusiastically for a while longer, until Lena signaled it was time for her to rest. As Lena gently pushed her mother's wheelchair out of the room, I called out to Mar to wake him up and move him aside.

Hearing me say his name, the old lady looked surprised. "Mar? Oh, I just learned his name now," she exclaimed. "I had asked Lena to find out for me before, but she always forgot to tell me." Her reaction caught me off guard, and I responded with an awkward smile, not knowing what to say. Then, she was wheeled away to rest, leaving me alone in the living room with Mar.

As I patted Mar's head absently, my eyes wandered around the room. The walls were decorated with hanging photographs—some of Lena, some of the old woman, and a few with faces unfamiliar to me. One particular black-and-white photo caught my attention: a young couple captured in vintage style. The woman wore a long dress and a hat, while the man posed confidently in a sharp suit, an arrogant expression etched onto his face. "That must be the younger version of the old lady," I thought to myself.

The rain had eased up outside, and I began contemplating when I should leave. I decided to stay a little longer, hoping to talk to Lena before going. I had a

few questions that felt necessary to ask—about that night on the corner of the street, about the incident earlier this morning, and of course, about getting my Argentina jersey back. It was also on my mind to discuss their apparent longstanding relationship with Mar, which puzzled me more the longer I stayed.

I waited, mentally rehearsing my questions, while considering how to ask Lena directly yet politely. Then, as soon as the conversation was over, I planned to take Mar home with me and hopefully enjoy a small picnic later in the afternoon as the rain completely stopped.

“It is still raining outside, yah?” came her voice, slipping into the quiet like a thread weaving through fabric. I stayed composed, not startled by the familiar sound. Without immediately turning, I kept my gaze out the window, observing the soft drizzle that veiled the world outside. After a moment, I turned toward her, keeping my expression neutral—stoic even. I didn’t want to overplay any emotions, especially when the weight of my thoughts loomed large. The truth was, there was an unresolved tension, an unspoken unease between us—her falsehood to her mother, the air of familiarity she was trying to create, and the unspoken storm in my mind.

There she stood, her usual easy smile lighting up her face, as though everything about this moment was perfectly ordinary. She moved with a kind of effortless

comfort that seemed at odds with the questions churning within me. For her, the atmosphere felt casual, her smile a gesture of ease. But for me, it wasn't so simple. This wasn't a game or an idle chat to pass the time—it was a crossroads, one that demanded clarity amid the chaos of my thoughts.

I didn't know where to start—whether to acknowledge the charade, press for the answers I needed, or ease into the conversation with care. But in that moment, her presence felt both familiar and alien, as though she walked a tightrope between the mysteries of my world and her own. All I knew was that something had to be addressed, and my heart braced itself for the path ahead.

“Who are you, Lena?” I asked her instantly while walking toward her, holding my gaze fixed on hers. I didn't care at all about her attempt to make small talk about the weather, which seemed entirely off-topic. She looked slightly puzzled, as though she realized her excuse failed to control the tension in the room. This was not the time for pleasantries—this was a conversation between two adults, one that demanded clarity.

She appeared confused, with nothing meaningful to say. She remained silent, clearly unsettled. The air between us grew heavy with awkwardness, thickened by the lack of words. As the silence became almost unbearable, I glanced at the sleeping Mar on the couch

and asked another question, hoping to draw a response. “How long have you known each other?” I asked.

She followed my gaze toward Mar and replied, “Long enough.”

“Since when?” I interjected, determined to clear the air.

She sighed deeply, then walked back to the couch and sat down, leaning forward as she stared blankly into space. I chose to remain standing, firmly planted in my spot, carefully observing her every move. “He started coming here a few years ago,” she finally admitted. “I don’t know why.”

She looked at me again and continued, “He eats and sleeps here all day while his owner isn’t around to feed him or take care of him.” Her words sparked a flicker of anger within me, but I kept my posture steady, refusing to let my emotions show. I didn’t want to give away any reaction that might reveal my thoughts or intentions. The situation required composure, no matter how much her revelation unsettled me.

“I am an actor,” I immediately raised my voice to clarify and justify that I was not an irresponsible owner, as she seemed to think, while placing my right hand on my chest.

“I know,” she intervened without hesitation. “I know you are. That’s why I resolved to show kindness by taking

care of him. Good to know that Mar's owner is an actor, not another irresponsible owner."

"How do you know I'm an actor?" I asked her, suspicion and curiosity evident in my eyes.

She smiled faintly and replied, "I always go to your weekend shows. What's the name of your theater again?"

"*Halakan!*" I answered quickly, almost instinctively.

"Yes, what a nice show!" she responded, but then immediately shifted her gaze to Mar to avoid eye contact. I noticed it clearly. It seemed as though she was deliberately trying to steer the conversation away from the main topic, fully aware of it and plotting her escape all along. I could see the nervousness creeping over her.

"How about you?" I asked, pulling out another topic to ease the atmosphere. "What do you do for the rest of the day?" I continued, hoping to gather more information.

"Me?" she asked, her response sounding nonsensical and unnecessary.

I nodded silently as an acknowledgment, waiting for her answer.

"I used to be a waitress at a nearby coffee shop," she said, smiling faintly, though her expression seemed a bit forced. "But not anymore." She looked at me, and I could sense the conversation had softened, feeling less tense than before.

“So, you have nothing to do, at least for now?” I asked in a more casual, relaxed tone, trying to make the discussion friendlier.

“No, of course I do,” she replied, her eyes brightening as she looked at me.

“And what would that be, if I may ask?” I inquired, genuinely curious.

“Uhhh, maybe taking care of this lazy boss,” she said, pointing at the sleeping Mar and laughing. Without thinking, I followed her lead and laughed as well. I almost regretted it, but I decided to let it pass.

“Like seriously?” I asked again, this time with a slightly more serious tone, seeking clarification.

She responded with a vivid expression and a familiar tone, “Seriously! Like I told you—don’t you believe me?” I smiled faintly, waiting for a more serious answer, but it seemed she genuinely had nothing to hide. She truly had nothing significant to occupy her time after losing her job as a waitress at the coffee shop. While her reason for losing the job remained a mystery, I chose not to bring up such a sensitive topic.

The conversation drifted into an awkward silence once more, a quietness that lingered between us as we both contemplated what to say next.

Then, I glanced at the framed photos on the wall, hoping to catch her attention and spark a conversation

about the people in them. To me, it seemed likely they were her siblings, and I was certain the couple in the black-and-white photo must have been her parents.

“So, you have two brothers?” I asked casually, noticing she hadn’t offered any remarks about the photos herself. Her response came hesitantly, “Uhhh,” as her eyes shifted toward the same photo I had been examining.

Clearing my throat, I decided to ask a more sensitive question. “Where are they now?”

“They’re married already,” she replied softly.

“Oh, that’s why you’re the only one staying with your mom?” I added quickly, trying to show some understanding. “What is her name?”

“Yes, it’s been like this since papa passed away,” she explained, then added, “I just live with mama Ana.”

I sighed, feeling the weight of her words. “I’m sorry to hear that,” I said sincerely.

She offered a faint smile and replied, “It’s okay.” The room felt momentarily heavier, but her quiet resilience was palpable in that simple response.

Then, I noticed how her emotions intensified, tears threatening to overwhelm her. I resisted the urge to focus too much on her, fearing it might amplify her vulnerability. Instead, I made an excuse to check the weather again, giving her the space to process her feelings freely.



“I’m the last daughter,” she broke the silence, her voice soft but steady. Grateful for her words, I felt the atmosphere shift, becoming more comfortable.

“Oh yeah?” I responded casually, keeping the tone light. “Almost the same—I’m the only son in my family.”

Her gaze met mine for the first time since her tears began. “Really?” she asked, her curiosity evident. I simply lifted my eyebrows in confirmation.

“You’re lucky to have brothers,” I remarked, a simple comment that immediately brought a small spark of warmth to her expression—a smile.

“Not really,” she said with a forced laugh.

“Not really,” she repeated, this time with a more intense tone that carried a weight I couldn’t yet understand. Then, she placed her hands over her face, her breathing heavy and uneven. I realized she was crying but felt unsure of how to console her. Hesitant and uncertain, I quietly moved to sit beside her, my mind blank and nervous. I had no words to offer, no idea how to navigate this sudden, raw emotion, so I chose to simply be present.

After a few moments of silence, she began to calm herself, and so did I. Then, with much emotion, she started sharing the reasons for her tears, unprompted but clearly needing to release the burden she carried.

She explained how, after their marriages, her brothers had stopped coming to the house as often. When her papa passed away, the house grew quiet, like a grave for the living. She felt the weight of responsibility for everything—food, comfort, and even happiness in their home—falling solely on her shoulders. It pained her to see her mama’s sadness, the years catching up to her and bringing illnesses in their wake.

One of the darkest moments, she recounted, was when her mama fell down the stairs on the day she returned home from her job at the coffee shop. The grief and desperation of that moment overwhelmed her as she called an ambulance and watched her mama’s world change, now confined to a wheelchair. In her own stress and despair, she hadn’t wanted to inform her brothers of the incident. But eventually, with a mix of anger and reluctant patience, she told them.

She admitted that while she hated them in silence for their absence, they were still her brothers. She knew she had to be a good younger sister for them, no matter how much it hurt. Her words hung in the air, each one heavy with the weight of her experiences, and I listened quietly, letting her share without interruption.

“The stress and depression reached their peak the day my boss handed me a slip of paper,” she recalled, describing the moment she was let go from her job as

a waitress at the coffee shop. She didn't delve into the specifics of why she lost the job, but it was clear the weight of her responsibilities at home and her family's burdens had played a significant role. Each day, she had to prepare food for her disabled mama before heading to work, juggling obligations that many wouldn't dare to manage. And yet, there must have been more to the story—things she alone truly understood.

From that day onward, she had little more than a dwindling savings account and a suffocating hopelessness that permeated the house. She didn't share the news with her mama, choosing instead to retreat to her room, lock the door, and sit on the floor gazing at a sky filled with stars but empty of life. In desperation, she sifted through what tips she had left hidden under the bed but realized there was no option left. Reluctantly, she decided to call the brothers she had avoided contacting for so long.

Pulling out their numbers, she told them to come home, explaining her job loss and her urgent need for financial support. She also spoke extensively about mama, hoping to remind them of how distant they had been and how long it had been since they truly connected with her. To her relief, her brothers did show up a few days later and brought some money. However, their visit was brief, as they quickly left under the pretense of work or family obligations.

In truth, she had longed for something far more valuable than their financial help—their presence. But they failed to see that, unable to recognize what mattered most. Still, she expressed her gratitude for their contributions, even though the money came with suggestions to find another job.

Yet in her mind, she had already resolved not to seek another job. She was convinced it would lead to the same cycle again. Instead, she prioritized her responsibilities at home—caring for her mama, who truly needed her.

“Since then, I rarely bring mama to watch the shows,” she reflected with a hint of sadness. Her decision to save money and use it wisely rather than spending it on outings or entertainment was her way of ensuring stability, however restrained it may have seemed. Her words carried the weight of resilience, love, and an unspoken yearning for a better balance between duty and dreams.

“Did you often go to the shows every weekend with mama Ana?” I asked with an astonished tone.

“Yes, it was back when I still had my job, and I could save some tips for that,” she responded.

“Does she like theater?” I added curiously.

“More than you’d expect!” she answered, her eyes lighting up. “I think theater brings her more joy than

anyone realizes. She would laugh, cry, and shout during the shows, catching everyone's attention. She said she loved it since she was a young girl, like me. Unlike me though—I only love dancing,” she added playfully, and we shared a laugh as I replied with my amused ‘really?’

Then, her tone shifted as she began recounting how things had taken a darker turn. “Day by day, everything just got worse,” she admitted. Mama Ana's condition deteriorated to the point where she became dependent on pills, taken according to strict schedules prescribed by her doctors. The mounting pressure of caring for her disabled mother while grappling with her own personal struggles left Lena feeling more and more hopeless.

Her voice grew softer, tinged with emotion as she lowered her gaze. “I gave up,” she recalled solemnly, her vulnerability resonating in the room.

The air grew heavy with sadness, filled with a poignant silence. Both of us paused, enveloped in the weight of her words, as the storm within her seemed to mirror the faint rain still falling outside.

“One day, I decided—out of depression and stress—to do something I wish I'd never done, something I shouldn't have even considered,” she began, her voice heavy with emotion. I kept my attention fixed on her, letting her words flow uninterrupted, giving her the space to share what weighed on her heart.

She paused, covering her face with her hands and adjusting her hair, as though trying to gather herself. Despite her visible struggle, she pressed on, determined to share the painful memory. “One morning, after bathing mama, I told her we were going out together for the first time since her accident, since she’d been confined to the wheelchair. I could see how delighted she was—her eyes lit up, and she smiled bigger than I’d ever seen her smile before. I didn’t know exactly what she was thinking—maybe she believed we were going to watch theater, or take a walk in the park. All I remember is how radiant her happiness was, how it felt like a spark reigniting after so long.”

She paused again, letting out a deep sigh before continuing. “But it was all a lie,” she confessed, her voice growing quieter. “I didn’t plan to take her to any of those places—not the theater, not the park. It was somewhere else entirely. Somewhere that still makes me feel like I’m trapped at the bottom of a well.”

I leaned in slightly, sensing her hesitation, and gently asked, “What was that?” My curiosity mingled with concern, as her story seemed to be building toward a moment that had left her profoundly haunted.

“*Panti Jompo*, ... (nursing home)” she whispered, her voice frail and laden with grief. The tone of regret pierced the air, making every syllable heavy with meaning. I

sighed as her words sank in. It was a heart-wrenching revelation, one that I could never have imagined. Yet, even as the weight of her confession settled, I didn't feel inclined to place blame on her. There was no room for judgment in this moment.

Instead, I thought about the anguish that must have clouded her mind when she made that decision—pain so overwhelming it overshadowed reason. I've always believed that no daughter, not even the angriest one, would send her mother away lightly, especially when love is as profound as hers clearly is. Love, after all, conquers even the deepest struggles.

In that moment, I recalled a piece of advice I'd once heard: never make decisions when you're engulfed by sadness or elated by joy. Decisions made in emotional extremes often lack clarity, and I couldn't help but feel that this had been her experience. She was overwhelmed, trapped in sadness and despair, and in those dark moments, she faltered—as all of us do at some point in our lives. But falling isn't what defines us. What matters is how we choose to rise again, how we recognize the misstep and find the strength to make things right.

That was the story I wanted to hear from her. How did she find her way back? How did she bring mama Ana home, and how did she rebuild what had been fractured? Her journey of standing up again, of rediscovering strength and love, was what I longed to understand.

Lena's words carried the weight of a profound and heartbreaking decision—one made under the shadow of desperation and sadness. The image she painted of her mama calling her name, "Lena, Lena," with tender disbelief, was deeply moving. Standing in front of the *Panti Jompo*, her mother's realization of what was happening must have been a moment etched in her memory forever.

She described the anguish she felt as they hugged one another in silent grief, both filled with tears. The depth of her pain was evident, particularly in her recollection of signing the papers with the Director. Even then, tears streamed down, some dropping onto the paper itself—a raw display of her inner turmoil. Her apology to the Director was met with quiet acceptance, as if he'd witnessed such sorrow countless times before.

When she ran home, refusing to look back, her emotions overwhelmed her. Locked away in her room, she let her sorrow erupt uncontrollably, shouting and throwing things until chaos consumed the space. Her isolation lasted for two days, where even the basics of life—food and water—ceased to matter. In those moments, Mar, her loyal companion, became a distant memory. Her thoughts were entirely swallowed by the darkness, narrowing her world to that of a small, dimly lit room and a tiny, grief-stricken figure within it.



Her story spoke volumes about the fragility of the human spirit and the depths to which life can take us in moments of despair. Yet, even within the pain, her sharing offered a glimpse of resilience—a voice still seeking release, healing, and perhaps, redemption for the choices made in the face of overwhelming emotion. Her courage in revealing such vulnerability allowed the weight of her experience to settle and linger, a reminder of the complexity and humanity behind her decisions.

“I could not bear being that way, so without thinking twice, I immediately remembered the club near the coffee shop where I used to work.” She paused again, and the atmosphere was filled with negativity—I could almost feel it in the air. “Then, I decided to spend my nights there with the rest of the money I had saved. At night, I lived my life surrounded by loud music and drinks, even though I wasn’t used to either. During the day, I just locked myself in my room and slept. Things continued to get worse and worse. I got to know some people there who kept me company—though it was nothing but fake company, just for the nights. And for a time, I thought I had truly found my life there.”

She recounted how she danced with strangers and got drunk every night before heading home, her voice tinged with regret over the choices that led her further into despair.

“And one day, you lay in a dark corner of the street with half a bottle of wine, almost lifeless,” I intervened, and her reaction was immediate—she paused in silence and nodded slowly. “Thank you,” she murmured, her gaze fixed on the floor, her eyes empty and unfocused.

“I spent those days wastefully, hoping to be okay with thoughts that were killing me slowly,” she continued. “Even my phone stayed off all the time. What for? Waiting for anyone to call? I guess not. I was merely trying to keep living, even when there was barely any air to breathe and no spirit left to carry on. I truly felt comfortable around people who were just as lost as me, people trapped in the same circle of emptiness. Being around those drunk strangers meant no one ever asked about your problems; everyone simply did the same thing—trying hard to find happiness.”

She paused briefly before elaborating further. “But it’s just about ‘trying,’ not something real. And when it’s about ‘trying,’ it also becomes about failure. Failing to achieve what we’re desperately chasing: the illusion of happiness. Whether I failed miserably or succeeded superficially, it felt the same to me. When the day ended, when the music stopped, when the bottles ran empty, everything went back to how it had always been. I always found myself lost and helpless.”

Her voice carried the weight of her despair, each word steeped in sorrow, revealing the bleakness of her journey during those days.

“Then, one day, even before dawn, I decided to go home with a bottle of wine in my hand,” she began, her voice tinged with exhaustion and regret. “But my head was so heavy that I couldn’t even walk properly. Before I could reach home, I could no longer bear to keep my eyes open. I had to find somewhere to lie down.” She paused briefly before continuing, her gaze clouded with the memory. “I don’t remember much after that, but I stumbled to a corner and lay there, hoping that once the drunkenness wore off, I’d be able to get back home before any of my neighbors saw me. They’d only blame my mother, saying she hadn’t raised me well. But that wasn’t true—not at all. It was my decision, my stupid decision.”

She stopped to fix her hair, as though the act might steady her. Then, with an air of quiet disbelief, she added, “After the drunkenness wore off, I found myself in a completely different place.” She lifted her eyes to meet mine. “Your house,” she said, her voice filled with both relief and uncertainty.

“I think I could feel how you brought me home,” she explained, “but I was powerless—unable to move my lips, let alone my arms.”

“You were dying,” I intervened, holding her gaze as I spoke.

She sighed deeply, her breath shaky, as though the words struck her heart. “You were truly dying,” I

repeated, keeping my focus on her as tears welled up in her eyes again. Her gaze faltered, looking away to avoid the intensity of the moment.

“Hours later, I woke up,” she continued. “I opened my eyes just a little and saw the messy room. You were lying on the bed—I barely recognized you. But I knew the dog.” A faint, bittersweet smile flickered for an instant before her voice trailed off. “After that, I couldn’t stay awake. I was too exhausted. I fell asleep again.”

“In the morning, when I woke up,” she said, her tone softer now, “there was no one in the room. It was just me and the dog I used to feed and play with mama at home. The door was unlocked.” She paused, her words lingering in the air like the aftermath of a storm, filled with both the weight of her struggle and the fragile thread of gratitude.

“I decided to step outside to head home, but then, on an impulse, I resolved to stay. I hoped to see you again so I could thank you. Besides, the sun was already so high that if I had gone home, my neighbors might have grown suspicious and perhaps discovered the truth—that mama was now at the *Panti Jompo*. So, I stayed, keeping company with the dog whose name I didn’t yet know.

As I scanned the messy room, I started cleaning and arranging things little by little, filling the hours while waiting for you. When everything was finally organized, I decided to change into some of your clothes that I found

in the wardrobe,” she said, pausing briefly.

I couldn’t help but interject, “My favorite Argentina jersey and shorts!” She smiled shyly, her expression tinged with embarrassment, before continuing her story.

“And—” she began, but I cut in again, “Hey, where are they now?”

She raised her hand slightly in playful protest. “Wait, wait—let me finish first!” she said. I nodded and settled down again, letting her resume.

“And Mar and I really went back home,” she explained. “Later that evening, I returned to your house to wait for you. While waiting, I grabbed your book from the table and started reading.”

She looked at me and added, “Hey, your book is interesting!”

Raising my eyebrows in agreement, I asked, “It’s about history—are you interested in that?”

“Yes, it’s interesting to learn about history, isn’t it?” she replied enthusiastically before continuing. “I read while lying on the couch and watching TV, but eventually, I fell asleep without realizing it.”

“Then, as had happened the day before, I woke up at midnight and found the TV already off, with only the dog still beside me. You were asleep, and I realized I needed to leave as none of this had been expected. I still

had the jersey on, and while tidying up, I noticed a name written on the first page of the book that I suspected was yours—Mar. I grabbed a pen and some paper to write a note thanking you,” she paused, then added with a small, sheepish smile, “Oh yes, sorry for putting the mirror in the wrong place in the bathroom.”

“It’s okay,” I reassured her.

“And then I left, taking a packet of biscuits with me because I was really hungry. I tried my best to leave quietly, but the dog followed me out of the house. I knew that in the morning, you’d be surprised to find everything that had happened. But I had no choice—I needed to thank you for saving my life. It’s because of your care that I finally got my life back.”

She smiled at me, her words filled with sincerity, and I found myself wondering how such a simple act could have such a profound impact on someone’s life. I had never thought of it this way before.

Her words made me reflect on other simple things I’d once underestimated: the smile of a beggar, the cheerful grin of Auntie Helena; the small yet priceless gestures of my colleagues, especially Antônio; the wagging tail of Mar that brought me comfort without me ever noticing; the nod of *tiu* Rangel; the radiant smile of the girl in the front row who unexpectedly caught my eye; the dimpled smile of the girl I had recently started growing familiar

with; her hair; the gentle and caring aura of Mar around mama Ana; the dark clouds in the sky; every drop of rain; and even her tears—tears shed in despair and in hope.”

“Just the next morning, after restless nights, I decided to grab the papers—both mine and the Director’s—and go back to that building,” she continued, while I half-wondered about everything she had shared. “I was determined to bring mama Ana back home, no matter what it took. I rushed out in the morning, wearing the most beautiful dress in my wardrobe, and sprayed myself all over with perfume.”

At that point, I interrupted with a quick observation, “A perfume of mild roses, right?” She smiled softly but said nothing, choosing instead to continue her story.

“I really dressed like someone heading to a party,” she went on. “Then, with the contract paper in hand, I was ready to cancel everything. But things didn’t go as I expected—there was a problem: the Director refused to see me. He even instructed the guards not to let me into his office, citing reasons that I recognized as mere justifications. I couldn’t help it—I shouted as loud as I could, creating a scene and arguing with the guards. Eventually, they had no choice but to order me to leave because of the commotion I caused.”

She paused briefly before adding, “Another guard came to assist, and there were two of them forcing me out.

At first, they tried to approach me with soft tempers, but when that didn't work, they resorted to using force. They grabbed me by both shoulders and dragged me down the corridors to get me out. Even as they escorted me away, I shouted even louder, making sure my voice carried all the way to the closed-door office of the Director."

"I shouted, 'Hey, please come out, Director! I know you can hear me!' and kept shouting repeatedly, even using words I shouldn't have—words filled with emotion and frustration. Tears began streaming down my cheeks, and all I could cry out was 'mama Ana, mama Ana,' over and over again. I sobbed uncontrollably, forgetting entirely about my makeup and the beautiful dress I had carefully chosen. Nothing else mattered in that moment but giving everything I had left. It felt as though all my strength would be spent right there, in front of that building.

I believed this was my last hope—there was no other option. All the thoughts that had been racing through my mind on those sleepless nights poured out of me like a rushing river, leaving my head heavy, full of words I couldn't express. I felt as though I were walking a tightrope between two high buildings, suspended in the middle. My only choice was to move forward, hoping to make it safely to the other side, or to stand still, struggling to keep my balance while praying the wind wouldn't knock me off. Staying still seemed like the worst choice. I had to



act, and what I was doing felt like the only thing I could do with all my remaining strength.

But as I kept shouting, I realized it was turning into another failed attempt. Slowly, the tide of regret and grief began to overwhelm me again, washing over me like an ocean I couldn't escape. The weight of it settled in my heart, promising to linger with me in the days to come."

"She spoke, taking a moment to reflect on all that had happened to her. 'They brought me to the main gate, ready to shut it behind me, when suddenly, a voice called out from behind the guards, ordering them to let me in. It was the Director himself.'

As the guards stepped aside, she immediately ran toward the Director, filled with words she desperately needed to express. She began explaining everything while walking alongside him to his office, her emotions spilling out without pause—tears streaming down, her voice loud and unwavering. The Director remained calm and silent, listening patiently as they reached his office. He signaled for her to sit with a simple hand gesture, even as she continued talking, arguing for reasons she couldn't quite articulate. She was barely aware of the words she was saying, as her emotions flooded out uncontrollably, like a river bursting its banks.

While she was still speaking, he gently took the paper from her hand and handed her another document.

She didn't even read it but simply signed her name at the bottom, as did the Director. Once he archived the paper, he spoke for the first time, making her stop mid-sentence.

'Lena, Lena, calm down. Listen,' he said as he stood up, looking her directly in the eyes. 'I am sorry. I thought you were like the others—those who, without much thought, put their parents in the *Panti Jompo* for no reason and then try to take them back, only to return them again days later. Since becoming Director over ten years ago, I have committed myself to protecting these parents from being treated so carelessly. I refuse to let them be taken back easily, because I've seen how often they are returned shortly after. This has happened multiple times, and I've learned much from these experiences. I initially thought you were just like those people—rushed and thoughtless, not considering life or their parents.'"

"Then he looked at me with a strained voice and said, 'Truly, when children are not cared for properly by the grownups around them and fail to learn the meaning of life, they often grow up to see their aging parents as a burden to escape from, rather than a responsibility to embrace. Forget even talking about love within the family. I feel so sad about this, as almost every day one or two families bring their elderly loved ones, mostly their parents, here to this place. I smile at them to show my hospitality, but deep inside, I want to cry as I watch them. Some even bring their parents in fancy cars; I guess they

believe they've found happiness in life, and everything else—including their parents—is just a burden they need to resolve quickly so they can enjoy their wealth and freedom.'

Upon hearing this, I looked down as tears streamed onto the floor, the Director's words forcing me to confront myself and my brothers. I realized that, deep down, I had thought of mama as a burden to run away from—not as a responsibility or even as someone to love. I cried bitterly in regret, my pain visible, and the Director remained silent, simply observing my response.

Then, he took me to the place where mama Ana was. There was a backyard space where nearly a hundred elderly men and women were gathered, sitting quietly while listening to someone speaking in front of them. I stood at the back, scanning the crowd for mama Ana. It didn't take long to spot her wheelchair; there were about ten elderly people who used wheelchairs, including mama. She sat there, listening attentively to the speaker at the front.

The sight of her filled me with a deep, aching pain. Even from behind her, I could feel the heaviness of the moment. I wiped away the fresh tears from my eyes, wanting desperately to tell her that I had come back to take her home. But the Director advised me not to interrupt the speaker, so I sat at the back with him and listened as well.

I couldn't focus on the speaker's words—my mind was too overwhelmed by emotions and thoughts—but I kept my gaze fixed on mama. As far as I could remember, the man was talking about something religious, perhaps about God's love. At times, his speech seemed so funny that the elderly men and women laughed often, their laughter echoing through the hall."

As I fixed my eyes on mama, her laughter brought a genuine smile to my face. It reminded me of the times when our family was whole—papa, my two brothers, and mama herself—all laughing together, or when we watched theater performances that filled her with so much joy. It had been such a long time since I'd seen that kind of genuine, carefree laughter. Seeing it now brought a sense of relief and happiness, knowing that, even in *Panti Jompo*, she could still maintain her joy.

After about an hour, the man at the front concluded his talk with a prayer. I noticed the cross around his neck and guessed he was a priest. I briefly thought about asking the Director for confirmation but decided against it—it wasn't something urgent. Soon, the man left, and the elderly men and women were guided through another passage toward a different room.

It was then that the Director called over a staff member and instructed him to inform mama Ana about my presence. From afar, I watched as the staff approached

mama and spoke to her. She listened attentively, then looked up eagerly and glanced toward us as the man pointed in our direction. As soon as mama saw me, she gave an instant order to the female staff pushing her wheelchair to continue forward, away from us.

The female staff followed mama's instructions without hesitation, respecting her wishes, as per the facility's rules. At *Panti Jompo*, it was customary not to force the elderly residents to do anything outside of their schedules or internal rules. Their freedom and autonomy were valued deeply. Watching from a distance, I saw the male staff signal with his hand, indicating that mama did not want to approach me. My forced smile trembled as emotions overwhelmed me. Without thinking, I immediately ran toward mama, shouting, "Mama, I am so sorry!" over and over again.

The female staff stopped pushing mama's wheelchair as she heard my cries echoing across the space. The sound of my voice carried both desperation and hope, as I attempted to bridge the gap that had grown between us. Mama's presence, even from afar, was enough to reignite my determination to reconcile and bring her back home.

She looked at me and removed her hands from the wheelchair. Mama, I suppose, had heard me screaming from afar since her hearing was still sharp, but she chose not to look at me. Then, I ran closer, hugged her tightly in

the wheelchair, and knelt down to hold her knees. Tears streamed down my face as I embraced her firmly, though she remained motionless and silent. Her expression stayed blank, her gaze fixed forward, devoid of emotion.

I continued hugging her, sobbing and apologizing for everything I had done to hurt her. I couldn't bring myself to let go until she forgave me and embraced me in return. Then, slowly, I felt her hand rest on my back, and her breathing grew heavier. She murmured my name softly, "Lena, Lena. I knew you would come back."

Hearing this, my tears flowed even more uncontrollably, and I noticed that mama began shedding tears too, as she hugged me back. "I am so sorry, mama," I repeated several times, overwhelmed with emotion. Then she took on the role of comforting me, calming me down by assuring me that everything was alright—that I was already forgiven.

Mama revealed that she had always known I would return to bring her home. "I knew who you were since you were just a little girl. I always knew you were mama's good girl," she said to me, her words filled with love and reassurance.

As she recalled all of this, she cried silently, tears streaming down her cheeks. Then, she continued her story. "After that, I brought her back home. Before leaving the *Panti Jompo*, I thanked everyone there, especially the

Director. I apologized to him for not having anything to offer, and then he unexpectedly shared a little about his life story. He told me how he came to establish the *Panti Jompo* after losing both his parents at the same time in a car accident.

At that time, he was living far away from them, as he had already started a family of his own. He only called them rarely—maybe once a month—because of his work, and he rarely visited them. One of his parents eventually decided to visit him, as he always seemed to find reasons not to visit them. On the way to see him, they got into an accident, and both of them died.

This was discovered later when someone found a Christmas present with his name on it, meant for him and his family. After the incident, he became so frustrated and filled with self-hatred that he couldn't sleep at night. About a month later, he decided to sell his own house and moved with his family into his parents' house. He felt that the house where he grew up shouldn't remain empty. He used the money from the sale of his house to build the *Panti Jompo* as a heartfelt tribute to his late parents.

By doing so, he believed that his parents would feel happier seeing him from heaven. It also reminded him of the many elderly parents who find themselves abandoned when they grow old, with no one to take care of them or even to be present as their children. Every time an elderly

man or woman is brought to the *Panti Jompo*, he sees them as his own parents—a second chance to care for them and give them the love and presence they need.

‘Thus, families don’t need to pay for their loved ones to live here. Everything is on me! They are truly my parents now,’ he said, adding that some people also help him financially to keep this mission going.”

I felt a deep sense of sorrow and gratitude for meeting such a person with a kind heart, someone whose life had taught him early on what truly matters most while we walk this earth: love for others.

“On the way back home, I brought her to the park for some refreshing, something I had never done before. We watched kids running and playing, couples strolling hand in hand, and others simply walking for relaxation—just like us, I suppose,” she recounted.

As she spoke, I couldn’t help but think of Mar and the picnic we had planned for that weekend. My mind wandered briefly, and I glanced outside to check if the rain had stopped. Then, as she paused, I realized that her story might have reached its conclusion. For me, it had been a deeply touching experience, one that resonated with my own life. It reminded me that I too had been living far from my parents as they gradually aged. I sighed, grateful that I still visited them during holidays, though I felt there was more I could do for them.



Looking back at her, I saw Lena gazing up at the ceiling, wiping away the last traces of tears from her face. Breaking the silence, I searched for a way to excuse myself. “So... I have to go now, Lena. Thank you so much for sharing your experience. I truly feel for you,” I said, offering her a gentle smile.

“Wait a minute,” she replied, standing up and walking toward the room. A moment later, she returned with the Argentina jersey, which I had almost forgotten to ask about. She handed it to me, and though part of me still wondered about the shorts, I decided not to dwell on it. It seemed she had forgotten, and I found myself not minding at all.

Afterward, I stepped outside and saw that the sky had cleared—perfect weather for a walk with Mar in the park. We said our goodbyes, and I left with Mar at my side and the jersey in my hand. A few paces away from her house, I held the jersey closer and caught the familiar scent of her perfume: the mild fragrance of roses, lingering gently on the fabric.”

“We walked for a short while in the park, as evening came quickly, shortening our time there. Then, we headed home with the food we had bought earlier.

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The following morning, at the theater, the boss continued to talk about the previous performance,

which had surprised and impressed both him and the audience. Even though I felt the show didn't fully match the expected scene, it still received some appreciation. The most important thing was leaving a good impression on the audience. Interestingly, he even praised Mar for his role in the show.

At that moment, I suddenly remembered that I had forgotten to ask Lena how she ended up in the audience that day with Mar by her side. The curiosity lingered, but it was fine, as I knew she wasn't too far away. There would be another chance to ask her about it in the future.

During the discussion, the boss proudly announced that the success of the show had earned us an opportunity to perform in a bigger event scheduled for the following weekend. Although he seemed a little nervous about the request, he had already accepted it and emphasized the need for more thorough preparation. It was anticipated that a larger crowd would attend after hearing the rumors about *Halakan* theater's exceptional reputation.

Being that well-known was an achievement, but it also came with great responsibility. It could easily turn into a trap, leading to an ungraceful downfall. As the saying goes, 'The higher a person climbs a tree, the more painful it will be if they fall.' The boss understood this well, and I believed we all had to keep it in mind as we entered the preparation phase for the upcoming show."

“For the new show, the boss had already visualized the plot in his mind. He had previously emphasized tragedy as the most effective plot to capture the audience’s attention. However, after seeing the response to the last show, he reconsidered his approach. He realized that the audience could still get excited about themes other than tragedy. What mattered most was delivering something ‘new’ and ‘unexpected.’

So, regardless of the plot, the key questions to answer were: ‘Is it new?’ and ‘Will the ending defy their expectations?’ If the answer to both questions was ‘yes,’ then the applause would come naturally, as a bonus. This insight made it seem as though the future could be planned—even though it remains uncertain. It was a fascinating realization that gave us a clearer direction for the preparations ahead.”

As we gathered together, he presented the idea of introducing a ‘new color’ to the show—something fresh and completely unexpected for the audience. The idea was to combine acting and dancing in a single performance. Acting would take center stage, while dancing would serve as a backdrop.

Some concerns were raised that the dancing might distract the audience from following the plot, potentially making it harder to understand. This feedback was valuable, and the boss reassured us that he had considered

these points thoroughly before announcing his idea. He then presented the script to begin our training.

Fortunately, as rehearsals began, it became clear that everything flowed smoothly without any interference. Some characters were naturally suited as dancers, so they seamlessly blended dancing with acting while remaining fully in character. The boss's creativity and vision were remarkable. He had managed to conceptualize such a bold and unconventional idea, one that no one else could have imagined.

He sometimes shared with us how he stayed up all night writing scripts, showing up in the morning with a new draft in hand. We often noticed the dark circles under his eyes as he spoke to us, a clear testament to his relentless passion for theater. I have never known anyone more dedicated to their craft. His unwavering devotion and ingenuity are part of the secret behind *Halakan* theater's success.

So, this time I was assigned to play the role of the prince—what an important character. But I thought, being a prince is only significant in the real world, or at least in ancient times. On stage, however, there is another character who often seems more important than the prince in the castle. It's not the king or queen, nor the prince's brother or sister, but the warrior.

In most stories, even in fairy tales, the focus tends to center on the warrior who saves the kingdom, rather than

the prince who merely sits on his throne, expecting his men to protect him. The spotlight always shines brighter on the fighter, not the ruler. This stands in sharp contrast to real life, where the royal family, safe within their palace walls, receives more recognition than the fighters on the streets. What an irony—and indeed, a reflection of the harsh realities of the world.

This is another of theater's magical qualities: it allows us to laugh at the saddest parts of our lives and to mourn the emptiness of wealth and power. Theater provides a platform to rewrite the seemingly impossible realities of life. It's so much more than mere entertainment; it is a reflection of life itself.

Theater isn't about something imagined with no relevance to everyday reality. On the contrary, it's about the very ground we walk on each day, the feelings we often fail to experience, the tragedies of life that we have grown numb to, and the miracles we take for granted as ordinary occurrences. It's about what truly makes us alive and keeps us living.

Sometimes, just stopping for a moment to refrain from inhaling, we realize how selfish we humans can be—distinguishing ourselves from nature and God, as if we're separate from the world that sustained us. Theater has the power to bring all of this into focus and to connect us more deeply with what truly matters.

The plot revolved around me visiting another kingdom and falling in love with a girl from that kingdom who danced in the streets. This created a problem—the princess of that kingdom grew envious, feeling insulted. She thought it was an affront to her beauty, as the prince—me—had been drawn to another girl rather than her. The root of the issue, however, wasn't just the princess's jealousy. It was the fact that I, as the prince, loved dancing.

Reading the script and learning that my character was a dancer—a skilled one—was startling. I felt a bit worried because I had little experience with dancing beyond some traditional dances from my hometown. I wasn't familiar with the modern dances popular in the city. Despite my concerns, I composed myself, determined not to let the boss notice my hesitation. I thought to myself, 'Maybe *tiu* Rangel believes I'm a good dancer,' or perhaps he simply thought my acting skills made me suitable for the prince's role without considering the dancing aspect.

However, I knew that a failed performance on my part could ruin the entire plot, especially since I was one of the main characters alongside the dancing girl. It also represented an opportunity for growth, a chance to learn something new. I reassured myself, 'It's okay—it will help me improve.' Over the past ten years, I've faced many challenges like this, so taking on something difficult was nothing new. I've grown accustomed to them and even

welcomed them. Dancing, however, felt like the toughest challenge I'd faced—at least for now.

Fortunately, I learned that I would only dance in the very last scene, alongside the street dancer who was my princess. This gave me time to practice in front of the mirror and refine my skills over several days. Still, I debated whether training alone was sufficient or whether I should ask Vero, the colleague playing the street dancer, to help me. I hesitated, fearing that if word of my struggles reached the boss, he might consider replacing me. I didn't want that to happen—I wanted to be the star of the show. In the end, I decided to train on my own, determined to prove myself and rise to the occasion.

So, I headed home, thinking about it the entire way. I guessed that in the days to come, Vero might ask me to train, whether in front of everyone or privately. Both scenarios felt equally risky; if I wasn't well-trained, I could face serious problems. Just as these thoughts consumed me, I suddenly remembered António, then the coffee shop where he worked, and finally, the girl who used to work there before she left—Lena. She once told me that she loved dancing.

'Lena,' the realization sparked in my mind as my eyes widened. Without wasting time, I quickened my pace and headed to her house. When I arrived, I knocked on the door, and she was there. She seemed to be cooking, with

sweat glistening on her forehead. She let me in and had me sit on the couch, but I immediately shared the reason behind my visit. It wasn't a casual visit—I had something important and urgent to ask her.

'Can you teach me to dance?' I blurted out while she was walking across the room. She stopped in her tracks and looked at me with a playful 'really?' smile, as though she thought I was joking. Then, without saying anything, she resumed walking, possibly heading toward the kitchen.

Then, not wanting to waste any more time, I crossed her path and stopped her to seriously reassure her that I was earnest about my request. I placed my hands on her shoulders, looked her directly in the eyes, and asked slowly and deliberately, 'Can you teach me to dance?' She appeared confused and raised her eyebrows, seemingly not understanding the gravity of my question.

Without saying a word, she removed my hands from her shoulders and walked away with a smile. I decided not to follow her this time and instead returned to the couch in the living room. Sitting there, I found Mar coming out from another room, so I played with him—taming him, kissing him, and letting him animate my mood a bit as I waited.

After a few minutes, Lena entered the living room, pushing her Mama in a wheelchair. We greeted each other, but my mind remained preoccupied with the



sense of urgency I felt. I was anxious, worried that this interaction with her mama might steal my precious time away from getting trained by Lena.

As we conversed briefly, Lena suddenly turned to her mama and said in surprise, ‘Mama, he wants to train me in dancing!’ Her mama’s face lit up with delight, her eyes shining with excitement. Both of them laughed heartily at the thought, and though I joined in, my laughter felt forced—it was just a facade.

Trying to clarify the situation, I quickly interjected, ‘No, no, actually I’m the one who wants to learn from her,’ signaling with my hands to emphasize the correction. Then, I gestured toward Lena, highlighting the unexpected fib she had just told her mama. I hoped to redirect the focus back to my actual request, though the lighthearted moment lingered between us.

“Ouhh,” mama suddenly exclaimed while covering her forehead. Lena immediately ran toward her, checking to ensure she was composed and calm.

“Is mama okay?” I asked worriedly, and Lena pointed at her forehead, implying that mama had a headache. Lena then pushed her into her room to let her rest, chatting softly in her ear along the way. I stayed in the living room, waiting.

A moment later, Lena returned with a smile on her face. Standing in front of me, she fixed her hair and said,

“What?” as she looked at me. Confused, I hesitated before she clarified, “I said, what kind of dance do you want me to teach you?”

Her words enlightened me, and I replied quickly, “Ouh, okay. Did you just say ‘what kind?’ Does that mean you know various types of dance?”

With a confident tone, she answered, “Sure, why not?”

I smiled and nodded while looking away. “Then teach me the easiest one first,” I exclaimed.

“But why is this urgent?” she asked.

“No, I just want to know,” I answered quickly.

“No, you should answer the question first; then I will teach you,” she replied firmly.

I fell silent for a moment before admitting, “For the show.”

“Uhm,” she said while nodding. Then, with a playful tone, she added, “But you’re an actor—don’t you know how to dance better than other people?” It felt like a sarcastic joke, and she smiled. I smiled too, though slightly embarrassed, and looked away again in a bit of shame.

She then laughed and said, “Don’t worry, I will teach you. But I know you’ve danced at least once or twice in

your life, haven't you? So, tell me—what kind of dance have you done?"

"Yes, I have," I replied. "But it's only our traditional dance from my hometown called *tebedai*. Other than that, I know nothing!"

"Uhm, I've never even heard of that," she said.

"Really? How come?" I answered quickly, full of amazement.

She nodded to confirm and said, "Then, let's make a deal."

"What is the deal?" I asked while standing up.

She pointed her finger at me and said, "After you learn to dance, you'll teach me your *tebedai*, okay? Deal?"

"Deal!" I exclaimed enthusiastically, shaking her hand.

"Okay, let's begin then," she said. I immediately opened my arms and prepared to move. I noticed Mar wagging his tail, clearly as excited as I was with the lively energy in the room.

"Hey, you haven't told me which kind of dance," she exclaimed.

"Ouh," I said, pausing for a moment to think. "The dance of the ancient kingdom of old times. Do you know that too?" I asked hesitantly, fearing she might not be

familiar with that type of dance. But without even saying a word, her expression shifted, and she stepped closer to me, beginning to teach me every step of that royal dance. I couldn't help but wonder from whom she had learned it; she moved with such ease and grace while I struggled to get used to the tricky footwork.

Still, I felt somewhat confident about keeping up with the rhythm, as *tebedai* relies more on rhythm than on complex movements. Watching her move so effortlessly, I thought to myself that when the time came for her to learn *tebedai*, it would probably be far easier for her than it had been for me to learn this royal dance.

As we practiced, I occasionally commented on my mistakes, blaming myself for missing the steps. Yet she remained silent, her focus entirely on my feet. She had one hand gently holding mine and the other resting on my shoulder, guiding me with quiet determination. It was as if her silence carried reassurance, encouraging me to keep trying despite my awkwardness.

After several minutes, I slowly got used to the steps, and then she began pushing me around while maintaining the same posture. It became trickier at that point; I had to make an extra effort to adjust to the movements. Yet, I eventually found it manageable because I didn't need to change the pattern of the steps—just a slight adjustment to move around. Gradually, I got the hang of it.

She could sense my improvement as she looked up at me. I smiled, but she shook her head to signal ‘no.’ I quickly understood the message: my expression also mattered in this type of dance. So, I adjusted my expression to embody that of a prince from a royal family—graceful and elegant. It wasn’t difficult for me to change my expression, as acting is my expertise and a natural part of my craft.

When she saw my new, refined expression, she nodded in approval, as if I had finally achieved the right demeanor. Immersed in the moment, I began to listen to imagined notes playing inside my head while dancing, as if there was actual music accompanying us. I had a feeling she might also be hearing a similar melody in her mind, though I couldn’t say for certain if it was the same as mine.

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Having learned the steps, I continued dancing for a while. Finally, she stopped and asked, “Okay?” Both of us burst into laughter, breaking the intensity of the practice with a shared moment of joy.

“Uff,” I sighed, feeling the tiredness in my body as I heard the faint sound of raindrops beginning outside.

“Hey, how quick you are to learn it!” she exclaimed with laughter, playfully tapping my shoulder.

“No, no. I haven’t mastered it yet,” I replied in a determined tone. “I really need to master it—not just know it. You know, I’ll be dancing in front of millions of people!”

“Wow,” she responded, clapping her hands and giving me a thumbs-up to show her support.

Then I laughed and glanced outside. “I should go now since the rain is starting to get heavier. Otherwise, I might get stuck here.” We shared another laugh as I called Mar to join me. Together, we ran into the pouring rain, getting completely soaked. Fortunately, I had left the script papers at her house, so they were safe from the rain. While running, I briefly wondered how I’d manage to practice at night without the script but soon resolved to stop worrying about it.

However, she was the one who reminded me about it, as if she knew I had already forgotten. Without much discussion, she handed me her phone to enter my number so she could send me photos of the script later that evening. She promised to do so, which caught me by surprise—I hadn’t expected to get her number so effortlessly.

As I walked home, I couldn’t stop my thoughts from racing. “Will she text me every night? Will she even call me sometimes?” I let the fantasies swirl in my mind before catching myself. “Stop!” I told myself. I knew these were

just the endless fantasies that had haunted me for days, unable to escape from them. These dreams, once held so tightly in my heart like treasures, I had forced myself to bury, expecting them to fade. But as much as I tried, I knew deep down that nothing had truly left my mind, especially in those quiet nights when I closed my eyes.

As these thoughts flowed, her face surfaced—Maria. The person I had once fallen for still lingered in pieces, even in her absence, reminding me faintly of her presence.

At night, she really sent me the pictures of the scripts. I saw the notification while I was watching anime with Mar on the couch. I messaged her, letting her know that I would come by her house in the morning to retrieve the paper scripts so that I could spend the whole day training at the theater.

Maybe because I had never trained using scripts on a phone before, I initially found it quite difficult to do so. I was used to turning off my phone while practicing in front of the mirror, holding paper scripts in my hand along with a pencil to underline important lines and make notes. But now, with only the phone in hand, the process felt unusual and distracted my focus. As a result, I didn't feel like I trained as well as I could have and decided to turn off the phone and hit the pillow instead.

Just then, when I closed my eyes, something suddenly crossed my mind—a scene I had unconsciously grown

used to falling into, but this time it came with different images: the steps of two people moving in rhythm in the living room; the gentle hand that held mine; the weight of her hand resting on my shoulder; how she placed my right hand on her hip; the scent of her mild rose perfume; her flowing long hair; her smile; and all of it came rushing back in vivid detail. It jolted me awake, and I found myself staring blankly at the ceiling before getting up to check on Mar, sleeping peacefully on his pillow.

I didn't really understand what was happening to me at that moment. I decided not to dwell on these fantasies—the ones that had once almost destroyed me but left me with scars that never fully healed. I didn't want to get hurt again; I had promised myself that long ago. So, I laid back down and let myself dream, refusing to wake from the dream even though it reopened the wounds. Somehow, within the dream, the pain still felt bearable.

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In the morning, I went by her house, expecting that she might hand back the paper scripts before I headed to the theater. I knocked on the door—once, twice, and then a third time—but nothing happened. There was no noise from inside, no sound of footsteps. I noticed Mar playing in the grass outside as the day grew brighter, and



the bus was due to arrive soon. I felt a little frustrated but managed to keep myself calm and composed.

With a sigh, I left the blue house, hoping that everything would go well during training, even without the scripts in my hand. I hoped to find someone who didn't need their copy and could lend it to me for a while—perhaps Antônio, if I was lucky. My biggest worry was that tiu Rangel might notice the missing scripts or, worse, my struggles during practice on stage. I feared that, if my difficulties were exposed, the day might bring me bad luck, though I held onto the hope that everything would turn out fine in the end.

With that fear and anxiety weighing on my mind, I arrived at the theater only to find tiu Rangel already speaking in front of everyone, likely discussing the script and preparations for the day. Quietly, I sneaked in from the back, doing my best to avoid drawing attention to my lateness. Antônio was standing at the back, and he immediately noticed my tardiness.

I approached him and explained that I had forgotten my script and needed to borrow his for a while so that I could rehearse as the main character. I could sense a mix of anxiety and confusion in Antônio—he had never seen me forget something so important, especially not the script. He seemed worried that this might create problems, not just for me but potentially for both of us.

He clutched his script tightly, hesitant to let go, but with *tiu* Rangel signaling for training to begin, I had no choice but to gently but firmly take it from his hands.

I quickly scanned the script, flipping through the pages to recall the scenes. Fortunately, my ability to memorize lines and scenes came naturally to me, perhaps due to my many years of experience as an actor. In just a few moments of scanning, the scenes and conversations flooded back into my mind, along with the emotions and expressions they required. Fully prepared, I stepped onto the stage, ready to deliver my best performance despite the earlier hiccup.

*Tiu* Rangel lit a cigarette as he carefully scrutinized every little detail—the expressions, tone of voice, conversations, genuineness, tension, and everything else—to ensure the show would be at its absolute best, maintaining its reputation and striving for further improvement. He appeared highly confident, not overly concerned about the ten-year actors, as he trusted their experience. He had witnessed firsthand how they grew and evolved in their performances with each rehearsal and each show. His focus was on refining the new ‘feelings’ or ‘expressions’ to align perfectly with the intended track.

Honestly, I felt a bit nervous as I watched him constantly, worried that he might not be fully prepared. I feared that if it came to his turn, the script might become

an issue. After an hour and a half, there was finally a break, which gave me the opportunity to confirm some details with António regarding when he would perform and whether it would be okay for me to borrow his script, leaving him without it during certain scenes.

Both of us scanned through the script to ensure everything was set, but one particular scene presented a potential problem. In that scene, we would both be present—I as the prince and António as the king, my father. The scene involved a heated argument between the prince and the king about the prince's decision to choose the poor girl from the streets over the princess. The king warned that such a decision could provoke a war between the two kingdoms. The conversation grew tense, and I could already feel the challenge ahead as we debated and rehearsed the scene.

I was just as puzzled as António, knowing that in that scene I would likely be trapped and discovered. I considered taking the risk of asking another colleague for help, but I hesitated—I didn't want to burden anyone else. Instead, I held onto the hope that the scene might be postponed to the next day.

As the training progressed, everything seemed to flow smoothly, and time passed much faster than I had anticipated. Suddenly, we were just one scene away from the argument between António's character, my father,

and mine. I glanced at Antônio, and his expression seemed to assure me that everything would be fine. However, as his friend of many years, I understood the deeper meaning behind his look—it carried the same unease and uncertainty that I felt inside.

I was standing at the back, behind Antônio, trying my best to master my part so that no one would suspect anything, even though I didn't have the script in my hand. I paced forward and backward, glancing at the script while mouthing the lines to memorize the conversation. I thought I could handle the expressions on stage, but memorizing the conversation was crucial—not only my lines but Antônio's as well—so I would know exactly when to deliver mine. It was a little complicated, but I believed I could manage.

Just then, Antônio signaled to me, and I returned the script to him, carefully ensuring I wasn't distracted so that the words could fully stick in my mind. Then, it began. To my surprise, it worked quite well at first—the words flowed naturally, seamlessly aligning with my expressions and feelings. Occasionally, I let my eyes glance at tiu Rangel, who seemed increasingly focused on the script. It made me slightly nervous.

While Antônio took his time reading his lines, I moved to another side of the stage, preparing my next words and expressions in my head. Thankfully,

António performed at a slower pace, which gave me a bit of extra time for urgent preparation. With just a few conversations left to complete the scene, something unexpected distracted me for the first time.

“Mar is here?” I asked myself in disbelief as I noticed him wandering around at the back of the stage. Some colleagues had started noticing him too, playing with and taming him. The sight of him completely derailed my concentration. The words I had carefully memorized began slipping away as questions flooded my mind. “How did Mar get here? Did he follow me? But following me this far ... I don’t think so. Someone must have brought him here. Who could that be?”

These thoughts invaded my focus, making me forget every word of the script. I attempted to repeat my lines but failed repeatedly. Hearing this, *tiu* Rangel referred back to the script, checking the details with a critical eye. I began to sweat as António murmured words to prompt me and help me recall the conversation, but I couldn’t grasp them. My mind fixated instead on Mar’s unexpected presence and the mystery of how he had arrived there.

Meanwhile, colleagues seated in the first rows grew confused, as did *tiu* Rangel, who now gazed intently at me with the script in hand. António tried his best to pull me back into the scene, even following the direction of

my eyes to understand what had caught my attention. Some of the others started looking back too, trying to spot what had distracted me so much. But *tiu* Rangel, unwavering, kept his focus on me and the script, waiting for me to recover.

“Jo, Jo,” *tiu* Rangel began, calling my name as a warning. He always used the shortened version of my name, perhaps to remember it easily since he had met so many actors and people with countless names over the years. His voice was sharp, but when he screamed again, “Jo!” the anger in his tone pierced through the air, and the entire hall fell silent. My mind froze, and all movement stopped for a moment. Now, all the attention was on *tiu* Rangel, his face red with fury.

I looked at him, my heart pounding with fear. My body froze as if rooted in place. I dared not glance back at Mar but kept my focus on *tiu* Rangel’s enraged face. The tension was palpable throughout the hall, and I could sense the fear among my colleagues—perhaps even Antônio. And as for me, standing at the center of it all, the weight of his anger bore down on me like a storm cloud. I felt sweat forming on my brow, but I resisted the urge to wipe it away, not wanting to betray how nervous I was.

“Where is your script paper?” he demanded, shaking his own script in his hand—the same one he always used

to guide the training sessions. He raised his eyebrows as he waited for my response.

Then, suddenly, Mar barked from the back of the hall. The sound pierced the heavy silence, shifting the atmosphere ever so slightly. Even *tiu* Rangel turned his attention to the back of the hall. And then, amidst the tension, a female voice rose clearly above the murmur of the crowd.

“Jo, this! Take your script!” she called out loudly, holding up the script high in the air as she walked toward the stage, parting the crowd as she moved forward. Her voice carried a strange sense of salvation in the moment, breaking the spell of tension that had engulfed the room.

“Lena? Here?” I muttered in surprise at her unexpected presence. But, as always, I kept my composure to avoid drawing too much attention, especially from *tiu* Rangel. “She is my friend Lena,” I explained, offering a quick confirmation to the boss, who seemed confused by the situation.

“I am so sorry, *tiu* Rangel, that I didn’t inform you beforehand. I wanted to accompany the training, as she is interested in it,” Lena said confidently. Her words eased the tension in the room, and I silently thanked God for her quick thinking. She had an incredible ability to read the situation and align with my thoughts even before I voiced them. It felt like she understood me effortlessly.

*Tiu* Rangel's expression softened as he took in Lena's presence. Though slightly uneasy by the sight of such a strikingly beautiful girl, he quickly regained his temper and said with a laugh, "Oh, so you've been here all along? It's okay, take it easy. It's not a big deal." His laughter lightened the atmosphere, making it more friendly than awkward.

The rest of the audience appeared confused, as they hadn't noticed Lena until that moment. António, however, knew exactly what was happening. He smiled in acknowledgment, understanding that Lena had arrived just in time with my script papers.

"Thank you, Lena," I said sincerely, looking into her eyes. She returned to her seat, and I resumed my part, quickly scanning the script to recall the forgotten lines before seamlessly continuing with the scene.

As the situation settled, *tiu* Rangel, now reassured that everything was back under control, glanced toward the back of the hall and noticed the group of colleagues playing with Mar. Curious, he walked to the back and struck up a conversation with Lena. From the way he engaged with her, it seemed he was both intrigued by Lena and reminded of Mar—the dog who had previously stolen the stage's spotlight and boosted the theater's reputation.

A few moments later, I saw Lena leaving the hall. She waved warmly at *tiu* Rangel and the others with a smile before heading out. Finally, I felt calm and relieved,



knowing that the crisis had been resolved. I silently thanked her, realizing that without her intervention, I had no idea how *tiu* Rangel's reaction could have spiraled.

The training continued until evening, and as usual, I headed home gracefully, without the rain to trouble me. I went straight home as the day had already ended, not having the chance to stop by her house to thank her for saving me—albeit in an unexpected way. It seemed she liked surprises, both receiving them and creating them, but this one almost overwhelmed me. I hoped she hadn't intentionally kept the door closed even though she might have heard my voice and sensed my presence during those stressful minutes of waiting. I thought she might have done it intentionally, knowing full well that I would stop by her blue house early the next morning.

When I arrived home, Mar was with me, and we dined together while watching anime. Then, a call came through on my phone—it was her. I hesitated for a moment, though for no particular reason, before deciding to answer it. As I had anticipated, she began by apologizing, laughing as she did so, making her words feel lighter and easier to forgive. Without dwelling on her fault, she quickly shifted to a new topic to steer the conversation away from her mistake.

“So, you're going to dance, huh?” she asked playfully, laughing. “Your boss told me.”

Her laughter sparked my own, and I couldn't help but laugh with gratitude. She had helped me, at least, to make stepping into unfamiliar 'moves' a little easier. "I'll come to your house to train if I end up forgetting something again," I said hopefully. She laughed and assured me that she'd be available "at any time."

That phrase, "any time," bothered me slightly, as she had skipped the promise she made about the morning. But I kept quiet, choosing not to voice my thoughts. I reflected on how girls often seem to have excuses readily available in one hand and promises in the other. It's a balanced position—they can easily switch between the two and always appear to be in the right. I used the word "girls," not "*mana*," because I knew grownups weren't like that. In fact, when girls marry, they often gradually become more like *mana*—just like Auntie Helena, my mother, and mama Ana.

I wasn't sure if boys behaved similarly, but I doubted it. Boys, I thought, weren't as complex—more straightforward, with fewer worries. It's evident, for example, in their simpler styles and the absence of makeup cluttering their rooms.

To cut the conversation, I asked, "Hey, did you tell him that you're also a good dancer?"

"Uh, no. What for?" she replied with laughter.

"Hey, you should," I insisted.

“Why, Jo?” she asked, laughing again, likely amused by the short name she’d learned from *tiu* Rangel earlier that morning. I fell silent, glancing at the time and considering that it was nearing the hour for training.

“I will tell you soon, okay. See you,” I said.

“Okay. See you,” she replied, surprisingly with ease, likely because she already knew my training schedule. That was reassuring.

After hanging up the phone, I headed to training. I started with the dancing, and to my relief, everything seemed to fall into place. I found I could effortlessly generate the rhythm and melody of the imagined song in my head. Closing my eyes as I practiced helped immensely, allowing me to visualize her presence in my movements, which brought even more fluidity to my paces.

Once the dancing was complete, I spent some time reviewing the scripts, going through the scenes carefully to ensure I was ready. With everything prepared, I wrapped up the night, feeling content with the progress I had made.

Everything went almost the same, and the days leading up to the next great show drew closer and closer. The good thing was that I continued to improve as the days passed—becoming better at dancing, more familiar with the lines, fully immersed in the feelings of the prince, and united with the spirit of the scenes.

One thing I noticed during every training session was that as actors begin to understand the characters they are assigned to, they are able to perform perfectly. It's almost like camouflaging oneself with a new identity.

Of course, this transformation took time, but once we grasped every little detail about the imagined character, that character became real within us. Someone who was once merely a creation of fantasy could come alive through each actor. It's a kind of magic—though often considered ordinary by those who are used to it.

Isn't it true that an actor can serve as a bridge between two worlds—imagination and reality? Actors seem to master a superpower: bringing imagined people to life in the real world. They have the ability to create new worlds within this existing one, filled with new people, new emotions, and new possibilities.

That's the essence of theater. It's why the stage becomes a platform for creating a new world. And perhaps that's why people are often surprised and yet unsure why they feel compelled to applaud something they know isn't real. There could be truth in the saying, "Whatever we can imagine is real." I've felt that deeply, and I believe it wholeheartedly.

It's through imagining new things that people create new realities. What lies in front of us remains unchanged unless we dare to look beyond it.

Everything went almost the same, and the days for the next great show got closer and closer. The good thing was that I grew even better as the days went on—better in dance, accustomed to the lines, one with the feelings of the prince, and just one soul with the spirit of the scenes. One thing I noticed from every training for shows was that as the actors got to understand the characters they were assigned to, they were able to act perfectly. It was almost like camouflaging ourselves with a new color. And of course, it took time, but once we understood every little thing about the imagined character, it became real in us. Someone who was once imagined or fantasized became real in each of the actors. It was really a kind of magic that was often considered to be an ordinary thing by those who were used to it.

Wasn't it true to say that an actor could be a bridge that connected different worlds: imagination and reality? Wasn't it true to say that actors were those who learned, since then, to master the superpower to bring an imagined person to the real world? Or wasn't it true to say that actors had the superpower to create a new world in this existing world—with new people, new emotions, and so on? Wasn't that what it really was when it came to the world of shows? A stage of a new world? That was why people were surprised but didn't know why they should applaud something that wasn't real. Or was there truth in the saying, "Whatever we can imagine is real"? I felt that.

And I believed that. That was how people created new things: by imagining new things. Because what was in front of us never changed if we didn't dare to see beyond those things.

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Then came the day, with only two days of training left before the great show. This was when the sudden unfortunate event occurred. In the morning, *tiu* Rangel gathered all the actors and, speaking in a low tone and with a few coughs, announced that Vero, the dancing girl, had been in an accident and would no longer be able to perform in the next two days leading up to the great show.

Everyone murmured and made small noises, some sitting down and looking away in deep thought as the boss delivered the news. Vero was one of the main actors and had an exceptional role in the show—her absence was a significant blow. I had trained with her for days, and we had reached a point where our dancing was perfectly synchronized. She had told me how much she had fallen in love with the classic dance of the old kingdoms. At one point, she had even asked me how I knew such a beautiful dance. I only smiled and continued dancing. In my heart, I knew that Lena had been the one to teach it to me, and I had yet to fulfill my promise to teach her *tebedai* in return.

Then, among the noises and stress, I raised my hand into the air in silence while looking straight at *tiu* Rangel's face. He noticed me and asked everyone to calm down and listen to what I was going to say.

"Listen, everyone, listen," he said loudly, and the hall fell silent. I began to speak, "I have a solution for this," I said confidently and in a moderate tone. "I know someone who can take Vero's place." The crowd exchanged glances, still silent, as someone asked, "Who? Does she know how to dance better than Vero?"

I replied, "Her name is Lena. Yes, she dances much better." Then I looked around at everyone again.

"Lena, that friend of yours who came?" *tiu* Rangel asked with bright eyes, and I nodded.

"Uhm, okay. Then you can tell her as soon as possible to come and train for the last day," he said.

Fortunately, Vero did not have many lines to memorize, as her character mostly danced in the streets. In keeping with the customs of the story, poor girls were portrayed as shy and having few words. This was a positive factor because if Lena accepted the offer, it would be easier for her to pick up the script. And with her dance already ingrained in her soul—being the one who had taught me—how could I doubt my master?

So, after the training, I went home to tell her. On the way, I prepared the words in my mind to persuade her into the

idea. I knocked on the door, and she came out with a little surprise but, as usual, with a smile on her face. I entered the house, and fortunately, mama Ana was still sleeping—what luck that I didn't need to spend my energy and time listening to her stories instead of focusing on the reason I came to Lena's house. I tried my best to create a familiar atmosphere so that I could easily persuade her into the expected idea.

“So, there is a friend of mine who wants you to be a waitress again in a coffee shop,” I began by offering a request that I knew she would refuse. She had already told me once that she would never take another job, other than solely taking care of mama Ana, who had become more dependent than before. Her only hope was to manage the money her brothers gave her each month for medications and food—nothing more than that. As expected, she refused with only a smile and a shake of her head. She knew that I knew she would refuse such a request, and perhaps she started to feel awkward about me speaking such a nonsensical idea to her.

I smiled as well but maintained my composure and stayed focused on the idea that she would accept the request to be the actress before I went home. If she didn't, the whole show would fail, and the fame that had just begun to rise would slowly be dragged down again.

Then, I sighed and stood up. She looked very confused and, at the same time, anxious to head to the kitchen instead of wasting her time on my nonsense.



“So, that’s all!” she said, her confusion masked with a smile. “That’s the only thing you want to tell me? Or something else?” She then stood up as well, laughing and seemingly ready to end the conversation.

“No,” I finally gathered the confidence to speak the truth.

“You really love dancing, right?” I asked while looking directly into her eyes to convince her. She looked calm, as though she hadn’t yet grasped the idea of everything I was trying to say. I wandered a little, unsure of my footing. She nodded in agreement.

“So? So what?” she asked, opening her arms in confusion.

“So,” I hesitated, still trying to find the right words to say instead of ‘getting a job,’ which I knew she would immediately refuse. She stood there waiting for my answer. I couldn’t understand why I had forgotten all the perfect scenes and tactics I had prepared in my mind before arriving. Now everything was blank, and I had to find a way urgently. What a tough task to face in such a short amount of time. Then, I looked into her eyes again.

“Would you dance with me?” I asked her with bright eyes.

“Ok. Now?” she exclaimed.

“No, on the stage,” I assured her, trying to prevent her from getting too surprised by what I was saying. However, it seemed like she was already starting to feel taken aback by my earlier words.

“In the theater or what? In front of all people?” she asked, becoming increasingly anxious and nearly refusing the request immediately. I read the atmosphere carefully and sensed the air of rejection blowing through the room. I knew I had to do something to change that.

“Yes, but listen!” I said with effort, trying to get her to remain quiet so I could explain myself eloquently. “Listen, Lena, listen,” I repeated, and she finally fell silent, though her temper of rejection remained evident. I inched closer to her and spoke in a much lower tone, aiming to be as persuasive as possible.

“I know, I know that it’s a bit of a surprise, but I—and we all—need you. Vero, the girl who was supposed to play that role, suddenly had an accident, and now we’re all in big trouble trying to find someone new to replace her. If not...” I paused for a moment.

“If not what?” she urged me to complete the sentence.

“If not, the show will be canceled, and everything will be much worse than ever,” I replied.

She looked away, walking a few paces back, as if she was thinking. I felt a little calmer seeing that she

was actually considering it. I waited, hoping that after her deep silence, she would give the answer I longed to hear—that she agreed, hopefully.

“Let it be,” she looked back at me and said quickly.

I sighed, closed my eyes for a moment, and reassured her again. “Come on, Lena.”

“Wait,” she interrupted me.

“Then, I can do only one thing—dancing. Nothing more than that,” she said, pointing to my chest as she spoke.

“Yes, sure. Only dancing and...” I began to say more about the role, my happiness evident in my voice.

“And what?” she asked, looking into my eyes again.

“And just a little bit of conversation,” I replied slowly, using my fingers to indicate how minimal the lines would be.

“No,” she immediately cut me off and turned away. “No, I cannot do that!”

“Lena, just a little bit. Not so many lines to memorize,” I tried my hardest to convince her at all costs. “Maybe not more than ten lines,” I added, flipping through the papers to confirm that what I said was accurate.

“How about the expression? I am really bad at acting the expression. The conversation will be so dull, and

the show will be in trouble, and..." she spoke, her words flowing endlessly like a stream.

"No," I said as I inched closer to her and held her arms while looking into her eyes. "Do you still remember what I told you? There is nothing to act on, just be yourself. Just be yourself, Lena," I repeated, this time more slowly. "Speak as you do, and whatever expression you show, just be you, Lena. Don't try to be the one in your head, just be who you are. Let your body and your soul be one with the lines and the scenes."

"Okay?" I asked her.

She nodded in agreement, and I released her arms.

"Thank you," I said with a smile.

"Uhm, but..." she started again.

"But what, Lena?" I asked with a hint of despair.

She smiled. "Calm down. I will do this for sure. I just want to ask—when will the show be?"

I lifted two fingers and said, "Two days from now. But one more day of training—tomorrow, the last day!"

Thankfully, she was not so surprised about the limited time for training. I also managed to stay calm while announcing it to her, so as not to create any air of urgency or anxiety. But who really needs that much time to be their own self? I thought she believed in what I

had told her: to be herself, not someone else in her head. That's why she became so calm and willing to take on the task.

Truly, I repeat—do we really need days to be ourselves? I thought, “No.” The difficult part is trying to become someone else that exists only in our mind. To be who we are shouldn't take much time—it really should be the simplest thing a person can do on this earth: to be their own self.

I also thought that the one challenge she might face in being herself was other people's opinions, but it seemed like she was the kind of girl who didn't care too much about applause. Her focus was on being true to herself. That's such a wonderful thing—not caring too much about others' approval as long as we are authentic.

Doesn't that mean we've truly found ourselves, rather than constantly switching masks? I suppose so. I thought that for someone who has already discovered their true face in the mirror, they would recognize the masks they wore day after day. Only those who have found their true face can throw away their masks. I truly believe that!

So, we started training that evening—not focusing on the dancing but on the whole essence of the show. I did my best to help her understand the scenes, believing that by grasping them, she would find it easier to dive deep into the storyline and fully embody the role. And

she did. She understood the story and grew excited about it. She mentioned that the storyline was not much different from the fairytales she used to hear as a child from mama Ana.

I reassured her, however, that there were ‘new’ elements in the narrative that were crucial to making the show captivating to the audience. And so, it became the unending story—a tale that didn’t truly conclude, even after the curtain closed.

“Really?” she exclaimed in astonishment. “How can a story have no ending? Is it still a story if there is no ending? How come, João?”

She looked confused, but I smiled and said that it was still a story even if there was no ending. It confused her so much that she wondered for a while before continuing the conversation. Actually, that was what I liked about that show—the ‘new’ thing it offered to the people. It assured me that the show would bring many ‘wows’ to the audience with the innovative element introduced in the performance.

In the last scene, the story stopped abruptly when the prince and the dancing girl were performing in the street, while a loyal soldier of the princess had been secretly ordered to hide in a tree nearby. He had an arrow pointed at the dancing couple, ready to release it. Then, just as the arrow was released, the curtain suddenly closed, leaving

the audience wondering whether the arrow struck the prince or the dancing girl. Or perhaps the arrow missed its target, and the spy got caught by the prince's men. The audience was left questioning what the next scene would be: would the prince and the dancing girl marry each other or not? Or, in the end, did the princess, Mary, succeed in regaining the prince's attention? Or was the prince killed, leaving both the dancing girl and the princess to lose? No one knew. That was it!

What *tiu* Rangel expected was that this unresolved tension would captivate the audience, making them eager to attend the next great show, speculating about whether there would be a continuation or not. But, in secret, *tiu* Rangel had planned for the scene to remain incomplete with no continuation. He believed that sometimes attempting to continue something already beautiful could be risky, driven by the fear of ruining its perfection.

I thought life was similar to this. We preserve what is beautiful because we fear losing it. And one day, in the midst of that fear, we often find ourselves spending our darkest moments trying to return to the best moments. That is what the show sought to express—that there are no such things as “dark” and “best” moments; it is our emotions that create this separation to satisfy our ego. But, in truth, everything happens for reasons that exist beyond the ego's concerns.

I believed that what determines whether a story is beautiful or not is not the ending, because that would be unfair. A character could be good throughout the storyline, yet if they made a mistake at the end, they could be labeled a villain. Or, just because one lover dies at the end, the story is considered a tragedy, disregarding the love that was so evident throughout. Or, in many fairy tales, heroes only appear at the end to save the princess, which feels unjust.

The ending of a story cannot determine the whole story—it is simply not fair. Instead, the entirety of the story determines its essence. Even if the ending is somewhat tragic, as long as the story is filled with love, it is more appropriate to consider it a love story rather than a tragedy. Similarly, a single mistake made by a character at the end does not justly make them a villain when weighed against all their good deeds throughout the story.

*Tiu Rangel* was truly brilliant in designing a show that carried such profound meaning. I thought it truly taught people something important to reflect upon.

So, she trained that evening with me, focusing only on the lines that needed to be memorized and expressed as herself. The most important thing for her to notice was the key moments when she needed to pay attention, ensuring she could go up to the stage at the right time,



and so on. Then, I left the script with her to memorize and headed home, knowing that Mar would be waiting for me. Luckily, I had some food to bring back from Lena's kitchen.

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The next day, I went to her house early in the morning, just as I had told her. She came out with mama Ana as I knocked on the door. I was surprised to see them both, but it turned out that mama Ana wanted to assist with the training session. She was filled with excitement that her daughter had finally entered the world she was so passionate about—the world of acting. I thought it was fine, and since there was no one at home, Mar came along as well. Lena prepared something in a plastic bag for both mama Ana and Mar, ensuring they had enough for the whole day of training.

So, there they were—mama Ana and Mar—sitting in the audience seats, with no one else watching as we rehearsed for the last day. Lena was a little nervous and froze at first, but then she managed to fully immerse herself in the scenes. I noticed mama Ana smiling often as she watched us act, visibly enjoying the seriousness with which we prepared for the next day's great show.

Finally, we reached the scene where Lena and I danced. I closed my eyes as I held her hand and began to move slowly. All that filled my mind was the memory of

the day we danced in her house while it rained outside. The rhythm in my head was perfectly aligned with my heartbeat. I felt her presence and the essence of the old royal dance in every step. From that moment on, I continued dancing, not even thinking about when the dance would end, when the arrow man would enter to complete the scene. It didn't matter who would die first, because as I danced, my soul had left my body. And perhaps it went to a place not far away—a place where it could join a longing soul to dance forever in a world where arrows could never pierce the power of love.

## EPILOGUE



When I opened my eyes, everything was already dark; the curtain had already closed. All I could see were her bright eyes and beautiful smile. She was still there with me, holding my hand. In front of the curtain, the crowd was in a frenzy, filled with noise, just as expected.

The audience was overwhelmed by their curiosity to uncover the ending of the scene. They might have asked countless questions about how it concluded. I imagine some even protested in disappointment. Yet, I believed there were far more people who fell into deep silence, even as their mouths continued to speak. Deep inside, they must have felt a collision—the weight of incompleteness.

In life, there are so many things that remain incomplete or unfinished. Rather than tying up loose ends, we often rush to start new ventures, leaving countless things incomplete. And in doing so, we occasionally find ourselves stopping to pause, restarting our journey at a much slower pace. In those moments, we learn to appreciate the rose in our hands and embrace its thorns as part of its beauty.

Mama Ana truly cried, even during the training session. She felt the emotion deeply, as an old woman who had experienced so much. As she began to move through life more slowly, she realized how many things she had left unfinished in order to start new ones. Looking back, she became aware of this and genuinely wanted young people to learn from her experience at their age. She wanted them to walk more slowly in the garden; to stop occasionally and touch a rose, smelling it with a smile; to sit in silence at night and reflect while looking in the mirror; to greet people they met and smile at them always; to take time to relax on weekends; to name their pets and treat them with love; to listen more to elders' stories than to music; and to make as many friends as possible.

In the end, Lena froze for a few seconds, and we both looked at each other with a smile. Behind the curtain, all the actors gathered to stand in line for the final bow. Likely, most of the audience would still be waiting for the next scene when the curtain reopened; some might truly believe the show had ended, while others were caught in the confusion between both thoughts. And surely, only very few would feel nothing but life itself—experiencing it as deeply as mama Ana did.

The curtain then opened, and we all held hands, prepared to bow. Upon seeing this, most of the audience was both surprised and confused, as they could not

believe they had just witnessed an incomplete show. Some confirmed their thoughts that the show had indeed ended that way; a few were left in blank silence; and very few shed tears before starting to applaud, which quickly spread through the entire hall. Slowly, the claps grew louder, accompanied by cheers. No one truly knew what was happening, only that the feeling of life was so strong and infectious that it seemed to awaken even the most dormant emotions, bringing them to life and uniting them with the essence of existence itself.

Perhaps the show was complete; it was just something within us that longed to be complete when the curtain closed and the lights went out.

“I am really a dancer,” Lena said to me with a smile. And I smiled back.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

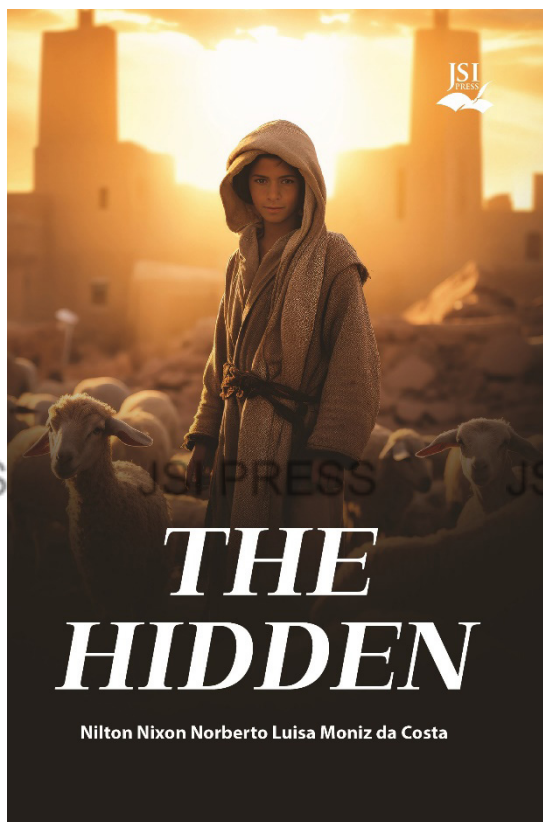


**Nilton Nixon** is a Timorese writer renowned for his captivating fiction novels. He has authored three books: *The Hidden* (2024), *Tasi-na'in* (2025), *I Died Twice* (2025), and *Insomnia* (2025). All his works are written in English and Tetum, reflecting his deep connection to Timorese culture and beliefs, which he strives to incorporate into his novels, making them truly Timorese.

Nilton graduated from Instituto São João de Brito, a Jesuit education institution. His educational background has significantly influenced his writing style and themes. In addition to his novels, Nilton has contributed to children's literature, with books available in the digital library, Library For All.

Currently residing in Dili, Nilton continues to share his passion for storytelling, drawing inspiration from his rich cultural heritage and personal experiences.

## WHAT IS THE ONE TREASURE YOUR HEART TRULY SEEKS?

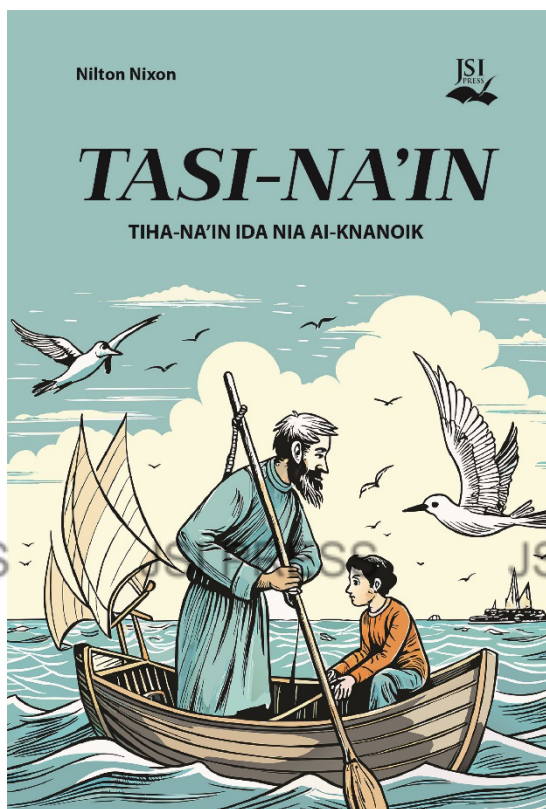


Embark on an epic journey with Markus, a humble shepherd boy who thought he knew the true meaning of treasure-his beloved flock. Yet, when a mysterious Lia-na'in crosses his path, everything changes. Suddenly, Markus finds himself thrust into a world of ancient

prephesies and untold riches hidden deep within the East Mountain. As he grapples with his newfound destiny as the next heir to the elusive treasure, Markus must summon all his courage and resilience to navigate treacherous landscapes, and ultimately uncover the greatest treasure of all. Join Markus on a gripping quest that will challenge his very core and lead him to discover the true meaning of treasure. Will he emerge triumphant and find his long-awaited destiny, or will the East Mountain keep its secrets hidden forever?



TAMBASÁ HA'U TENKE HAMRIIK METIN  
NAFATIN HASORU

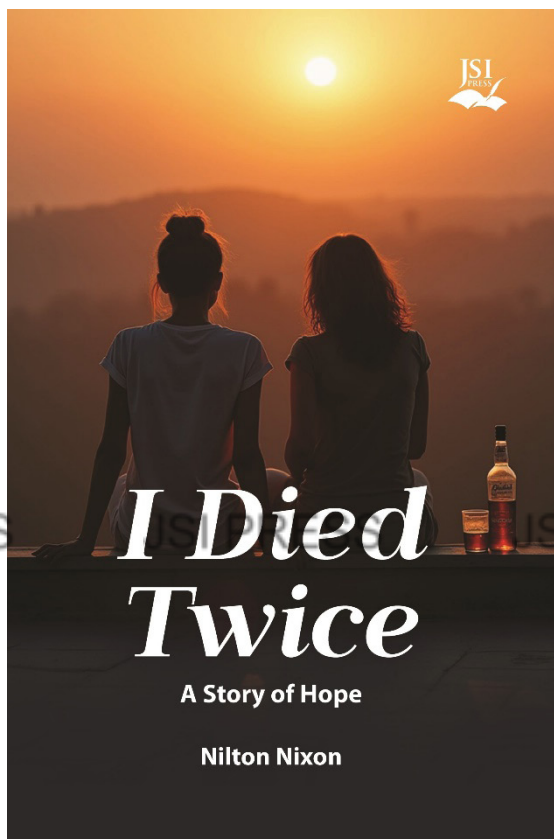


LALORAN SI'AK SIRA?

Loro, labarik-mane ida ne'ebé laran-monu loos ba tasi, derepente iha hanoin atu lakoi habelun-an tan ho tasi. Nia tuur mesak de'it iha tasi-ibun hodi hateke ba tasi-ikun ne'ebé la bisu-bisu liafuan ida ba nia. Nia tuur nonok de'it, maibe ninia hanoin barullu loos. Ida-ne'e tamba ema ne'ebé nia hadomi lakon husi ninia sorin.

Iha momentu ne'ebé ninia avo Bere la fila husi tasi-laran, Loro mos hakarak atu husik ona ninia mehi atu sai nu'udar tiha-na'in ida. Wainhira nia sei laran-susar hela, nia hasoru tiha-na'in katuas ida ne'ebé sunu no halakan fila-fali ninia ahi atu sai tiha-na'in ida. Tiha-na'in katuas ne'e hatene tasi nia Na'in mak se. No kalan ida, nia fó-hatene segredu barak kona-ba Tasi-na'in ne'e ba Loro. Loro nia matan nakloke no hakarak liu tan atu rona aiknanaoik rihun ba rihun kona-ba Tasi-na'in. Maibe loron ida, tiha-na'in katuas ne'e mos lakon tiha husi ninia sorin hanesan ho ninia avó Bere. Loro sei nafatin laran-monu ba tasi ka lae? Nia sei hakarak sai tiha-na'in d aka lae? Ka nia lakohi tan ona fila ba tasi? Loos duni, ninia moris sai oin seluk ona. Maibe, inan tasi no Tasi-na'in mak hatene buat hot-hotu kona-ba nia.

# WHAT SCARES YOU MORE THAN DEATH?



What happens if there are no more butterflies in your garden? Do you go looking for them in other people's gardens, or do you plant the most fragrant flower on earth in your garden to attract them? What do you choose to do?

Whatever your choice is, Rita chose to be the butterfly herself, appreciating her own garden no matter what it took. Even if there were no more butterflies flying over the flowers in her garden, she still believed in the fragrance of the flowers she planted. And she promised to do so.

So this is the story of Rita, a girl who hopes. She hoped that one day she could get out of her dark, narrow world and be free. And one day, she courageously got up and was ready to step out no matter what it would take. The desire to no longer be a prisoner drove her to do whatever she possibly could, even if it meant ending her own life. Unfortunately, she really had to die in order to get out of her prison. In the end, she died, and she died twice.